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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1966 Vol. 18, No. 5

NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

THE PATTERN WENT WRONG

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere out there, silent, faceless, a killer stalked his human prey. And somewhere out there Mike Shayne faced his toughest challenge of all: "Find the Black Phantom—before another dies!

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, VOL. 18 No. 5. April, 1966. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 160 W. 46th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, 12 issues $6.00; 25 issues $12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious © 1966 by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 160 W. 46th St., New York, New York. 10036

THE PATTERN WENT WRONG

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Somewhere in the hostile Miami night a silent, faceless killer stalked his human prey. And somewhere, somehow, Mike Shayne must complete his toughest assignment— "Find the Black Phantom — before another dies!"

A DARK NIGHT, WITHOUT a moon, and only the scattered lights of the dock area reflected in the dark water of Biscayne Bay. There was faint music from the waterfront taverns. Shadows moved across the shades drawn at the windows of the cheap hotels. There was drunken laughter, and, from time to time, bottles fell to the dark alleys below.

Earlier this night, a long red convertible had driven into the area and parked on a deserted side street of small offices and warehouses. The occupants, two women, had left the car and walked to a gaudy tavern that was brighter and louder than most on the waterfront.

A lighted display sign in front of this tavern proclaimed that it was a "Club," and that there was entertainment.

The two women were inside this club, *The Pirate Club,* for an hour. Then they emerged onto the dark street and walked two blocks west to another club, *The Biscayne Buz-*

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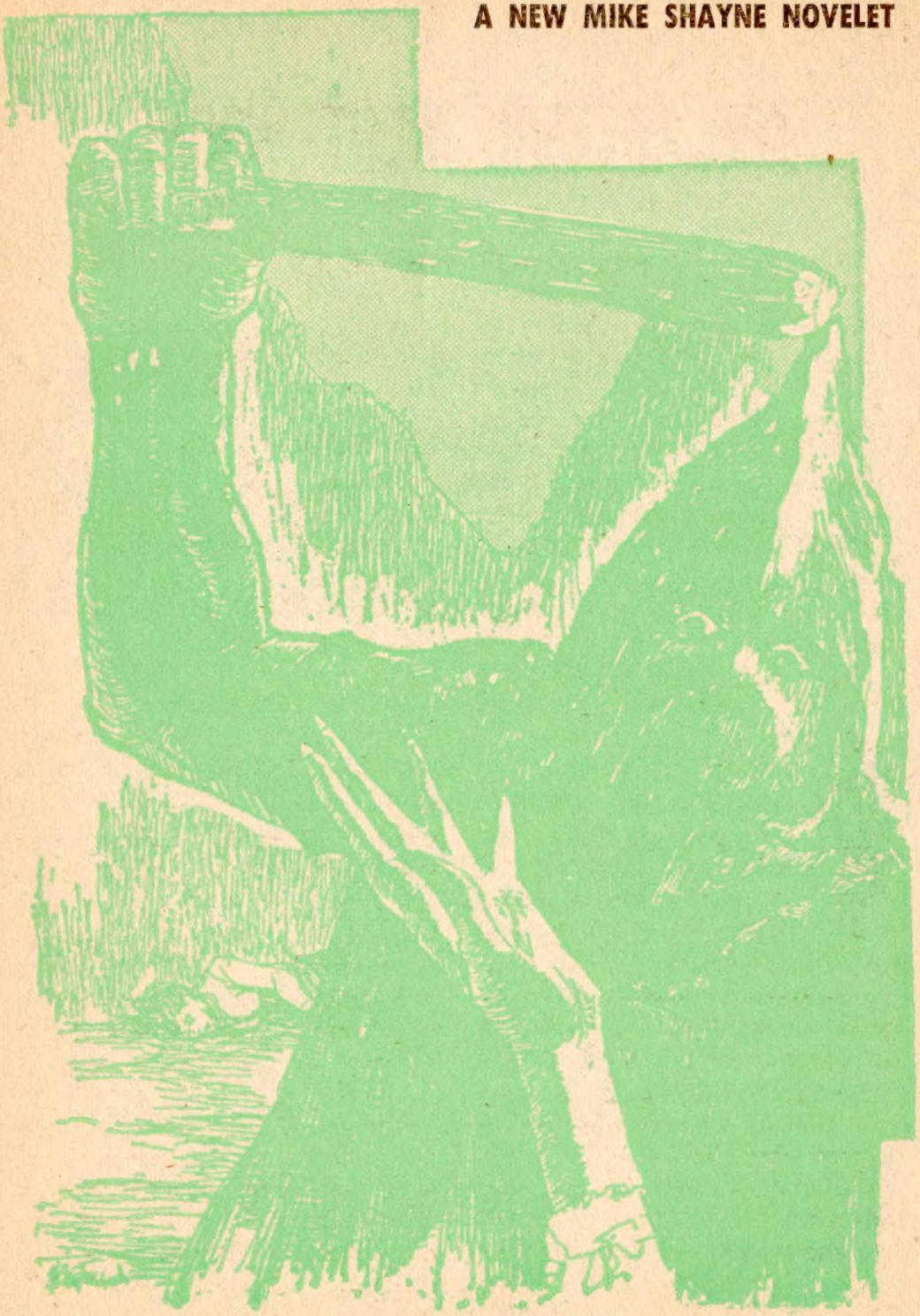
A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET



zard. They stayed in *The Biscayne Buzzard* an even shorter time, and continued their path from small club to smaller club until they reached *The Rum Bar* and the bottom—the borderline between the small clubs and the dingy waterfront taverns.

Now, *The Rum Bar* behind them, they moved, a trifle unsteadily, through the night toward their car. On the deserted streets they laughed to each other, talked, passed the dark cross streets that led to the black water of Biscayne Bay, and passed the even darker alleys. They were alone, two attractive women wearing good clothes, and sometimes they glanced behind them.

They did not see the shadowy figure in the alley one block from where the red convertible was parked alone on the side street.

They passed the dark mouth of the alley, hurrying a little now that their car was in sight, their eyes on the car and not on the black alley or the figure that glided silently out behind them.

The figure was a man, black and bulky in the night. Black because he was dressed all in black, a black hood over his head and face.

The man moved up behind them. In his hand there was a long, dark object.

At the last second, the smaller and slimmer of the women heard, turned. She saw the black figure almost upon them. She stood as if transfixed. The second woman stopped, turned. She, the second woman, screamed.

The scream echoed loud in the night.

The man in black struck her on the head with the long, dark object. The second woman staggered, bleeding. The man struck again. The woman fell, sprawled.

The hooded man leaned down and struck a third time.

Then he turned to the woman who had seen him first, who had not screamed, who still stood as if paralyzed.

Slowly, deliberately, he stepped to the immobile woman and struck her once, hard, across the face. She dropped like a stone and lay still.

Somewhere there were voices.

The screams of the woman had been heard. Quickly the hooded figure bent, took both handbags, tore jewels from the wrist and neck of the women and ran.

All in black, he vanished into the night.

Ten minutes passed before two men walked up the dark street and found the women lying on the street.

II

MIKE SHAYNE had been on a fruitless stake-out most of the night, and he was not in the best of moods when Lucy Hamilton announced his first visitor of the

morning. His grey eyes looked wearily at his desk clock when the voice of his pert secretary came over the intercom. It was only 9:45, too early for talk of crime.

"Mr. Harmon Rollins," the crisp voice of the brown-eyed Lucy said over the intercom.

Shayne considered telling the man to go away, to come again on a better day, to hire some other detective for solving the problems of the world.

"It's urgent," Lucy's voice said.

Shayne sighed. "Send him in, Angel."

Mr. Harmon Rollins proved to be a small, peppery man of about sixty, white-haired and well-groomed. The white-haired gentleman moved with quick, assured movements. He strode across the office and installed himself in the chair facing Shayne, who sat behind his desk wanting to groan at the sight of so much crisp energy.

"Mr. Rollins?" Shayne said.

"Harmon Rollins. Rollins Industries, Lake Manatee Land Development, Rollins & McKee Securities, et cetera. I have many irons in the fire," the small man said.

"Which iron is bent?" Shayne said drily.

"I beg your pardon?" Rollins snapped.

"What brings you to me, Mr. Rollins? One of your irons must have kinks," Shayne explained.

"Ah, I see, a joke. I'm not a man for jokes," the white-haired Rollins said. "You've heard of The Black Phantom?"

Shayne nodded. "The mugger."

There were few people in Miami by now who had not heard of The Black Phantom. A mysterious and elusive attacker of women, who wore all black, including a hood, and who had been working for months without a hint of capture, was not something the newspapers would ever let the public or the police, forget.

The Black Phantom had been news for many months. Ten women had fallen victim to his swift, wraithlike attacks.

"Twelve women," Harmon Rollins said. "Last night he attacked my wife and daughter. He killed my wife!"

Shayne raised an eyebrow. "Killed?"

As he recalled, The Black Phantom had killed no one up until now. His pattern was smooth, sudden attack and equally smooth escape with what loot he had.

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, killed! And my daughter is quite badly hurt. She's in the hospital."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Catch this fiend! I want him caught and punished! Our streets aren't safe."

"A mugger is a police job," Shayne said.

"Twelve attacks? The police are doing the best they can, I'm sure. But I want a better job, a quicker

job. I have money, Mr. Shayne. What good is all my money if I cannot bring the man who killed my wife to justice?"

Shayne pulled slowly on his left earlobe. "It's a police matter, Mr. Rollins. I'd have to work with them anyway."

"I don't give a damn who you work with! You have a reputation for doing what the police can't do. I want action, and I want it fast."

Shayne sighed. "All right, Mr. Rollins; it's your money. Now tell me all about last night."

"What the devil can I tell? I wasn't there. My daughter and my wife decided to go down to some of those waterfront clubs, God only knows why. You should know at once that my wife was very much younger than I am. Gladys was my third wife. Maureen is the child of my first marriage.

"Anyway, they went down to those ridiculous clubs. They went to six or seven of them. When they walked back to my wife's car, The Black Phantom jumped out and attacked them. He killed my wife, knocked my daughter unconscious, stole their handbags and most of their jewelry. My daughter is in the hospital. I expect she can tell you more if there is more."

Shayne nodded. "All right. Can she have visitors?"

"Later today, the doctors said," Rollins said. "Her face is badly bruised and she may lose some teeth, but she is not seriously hurt."

"All right. I'll start with the police, but then I'll want to talk to her. One question, Mr. Rollins. You may not like the question, but if I'm going to work for you, I better let you see just how I work. If you want me to work for you, you have to accept my methods."

"Of course," Rollins snapped. "I hire the best, and the best men do their own job."

"Good," Shayne said drily. "Now, just why was your wife on the town with your daughter instead of with you?"

The peppery, white-haired man reddened, opened his mouth to shout, and closed it again. His blue eyes stared straight into Shayne's grey eyes.

Neither man flinched a hair. Rollins nodded.

"Very well. My wife was much younger; she liked night spots. I detest such places. I am not a young man; I don't need a wife by my side every minute. She often went out alone, with friends, or with my daughter. Does that answer your question?"

"Almost. You had no particular troubles?" Shayne said.

"None beyond a difference of age. That did not surprise me. I expected that Gladys would want to step out a bit when I married her. It was only natural—I accepted it. Besides, I'm a busy man."

"Did she accept it?" Shayne said bluntly.

Now the peppery man turned

beet red. Shayne smiled. Rollins stared, calmed.

"I see. You want to anger me. All right, as far as I know my wife accepted me and our life. You won't get out of working for me quite so easily. I want you. I don't think Gladys felt like a neglected woman, and frankly I don't see what it all has to do with The Black Phantom."

"I don't either right now," Shayne admitted, "but I have to ask all the questions."

"Have you asked them all?"

"For now," Shayne said.

"Good. I'll write a check," said Rollins.

"My secretary will handle that," Shayne said. "Just stop on your way out."

After the peppery Rollins had gone, Shayne swiveled in his chair to face the window and the bright morning sun of Miami. A simple job of finding a mugger was not exactly the kind of job he liked. On the other hand, a woman was dead. He decided to talk first to the police. This was the kind of case they would have the best records on. And in mugging cases, it was the records that counted.

III

WILL GENTRY chewed on the stump of his black cigar. The gruff Chief of Miami Police was not happy with the thick file folder on his desk in front of him. He glared

morosely at Mike Shayne. The big redhead grinned back.

"I suppose they're on you, the good citizens?" Shayne said.

"You know damned well they are. The citizens, the Mayor, the newspapers, the Governor, and assorted anti-crime committees!" Gentry roared. "Damn them, do they think it's so easy to find one man who's never been seen!"

"They just think about twelve women," Shayne said.

Gentry sighed morosely. "That twelfth tears it. Now I'll really have them after me. Well, sooner or later he had to kill one."

"Life is hard," Shayne said.

"It was hard enough without you. Who the hell hired you to come into this, Mike?"

"Harmon Rollins, husband and father of the two latest victims of our Phantom," Shayne said.

"Dandy! Just dandy," Gentry snapped. "The newspapers will love that! Wealthy businessman hires private eye to help dumb cops. Great!"

"The papers won't get it from

me, Will," Shayne said. "You've got enough trouble."

Gentry nodded, calmed. "Thanks, Mike. I know that. Well, what do you want to know?"

"Everything," Shayne said.

"There isn't much, and what there is you've read in all the papers. About four months ago a woman was mugged and robbed down in the bay area. She was hit once, very neatly, with some blunt instrument the medical examiner is pretty sure was a length of pipe wrapped in cloth. All she could tell us was that the man jumped out at her from an alley. He was dressed all in black, had a black hood over his head.

"Then it began, regular as clockwork. One at the end of the first month, three a month after that. The two last night are the first this month. Each time we picked up a little more information, but nowhere near enough. The second victim said the man was tall, two others agreed later. The fourth victim heard the voice—low, kind of rasping. The sixth victim noticed he had a slight limp on the left leg.

"Two others later noticed the limp. But that was all. He hits and runs too fast. We haven't found a single clue at any of the crime scenes. All we know is that he's tall, has a slight limp in his left leg, has a low, rasping voice, wears black clothes, a black hood, and uses a pipe wrapped in cloth. We got that confirmed all the way last night. The daughter saw him good while he belted her step-mother. She confirms it all."

Gentry paused, bit his cigar. "Last night was just the same except that he killed."

"And attacked two at once," Shayne said.

"He's getting bolder," Gentry said. "He's getting cocky, and that means careless. We'll get him, Mike—we always do—but not until he gets really careless, makes a mistake. The public doesn't realize that. Until he gets careless, we're stuck; all the advantage is his."

"You've checked the convictions, of course."

"Up and down. This fellow doesn't appear to be any of our known strong-arm boys. I'll stake my badge he's no local boy."

"I'll take your word, Will," Shayne said. "Any luck with those clubs down there? I assume he operates in the same area, and he has to case his victims before he hits."

"Always within a thirty square block area so far. We've checked the clubs. They're no better than they have to be, but so far no leads. We even have plain-clothes stakeouts on all the joints. Nothing so far. If he's working the clubs, he's careful."

"Maybe the limp is a phony," Shayne said. "The voice, too."

Gentry scowled. "It occurred to me. And we couldn't even be sure about the description until now.

None of the victims had time to see all the details until last night."

Gentry chewed harder on his cigar. "Like I said, he's getting cocky. By attacking two, he gave the girl a chance to get a good look at him. She saw it all."

"Could she add anything?"

"Not a thing."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "How come she had all that time? I mean, he attacked the other woman first. Why didn't she run?"

Gentry shrugged. "You know how it is. She says it all happened so fast she just froze. She's not even sure she saw her step-mother struggle, but that's the way we see it. I figure the step-mother put up a fight and he hit harder than he intended. He had to hit her three times, the ME says. That's what always gets a mugger—a victim who fights back."

Shayne stood up. The grey eyes of the redhead were narrowed into frowning slits. He looked at the thick folder on Gentry's desk.

"I suppose I can't borrow that?" Shayne said, indicating the file folder on the case.

"No, but you can study it here."

Shayne shook his head. "I don't need all your interviews with bartenders, you won't miss anything there, Will. Maybe I could just get a list of each case, victim's name, time and place, victim's status, all that."

"All right, Mike. I'll have Lieutenant Bruce get you a transcript of the details on each occurrence. Is that all?"

Shayne nodded. "You don't mind if I talk to the girl, and take a look at where it happened? I might snoop around the bars some, the ones they went to last night."

"Go ahead, Mike. We need help. You know about cases like this. We'll get him, but each day we don't might mean another victim. And now he's killed a woman."

"And you can only die once," Shayne said grimly, "so he has nothing to lose."

"That's about the size of it. Unless, after killing, he stops," Gentry said. "I'd hate to have him become the Jack The Ripper of Miami."

On that discouraging note, Shayne left. He waited until Lieutenant Bruce had the copy made; then he left Bruce's office and went down to his car. The sun was standing almost straight above him. He got into his car and drove to the hospital where Harmon Rollins' daughter was recovering.

IV

MAUREEN ROLLINS was a small, lively girl of about twenty-five. She had been pretty, and would be again, but now she lay propped in the hospital bed with both eyes blackened, bandages across her nose and the left side of her forehead, her lips bruised and swollen.

But her eyes were not injured. They were blue, like her father's eyes, and they stared angrily at Mike Shayne as he walked in.

"If you're from the police, what are you doing here? Why don't you find that man? He killed Gladys!"

The girl's voice was strong and clear, a determined girl. Shayne watched her staring angrily at him, and he liked her. He smiled as he sat down beside her bed.

"I'm not from the police," Shayne said. "But I will find the man who killed your step-mother if you help me."

The girl eyed him suspiciously. "Not from the police?"

"The name's Mike Shayne. I'm a private detective. Your father hired me to help."

The girl nodded slowly. "I see. How can I help?"

"Describe the man again. There could be something you forgot. Picture him," Shayne said.

Maureen Rollins closed her eyes as if trying to see the man again. She shuddered slightly, reliving her experience of the night before.

"He was tall," she said, her eyes still closed. "He had a limp in his left leg. His voice was low and rough, sort of rasping. He wore all black and a black hood with eye holes. He held a sort of pipe in his right hand, it was wrapped in some cloth, black. He—he hit Gladys. I couldn't move. He hit her again and again. Then he hit me."

Maureen Rollins' eyes opened. She looked at Shayne. "I just couldn't move."

"You froze. It's not unusual under the circumstances," Shayne said. "Had you ever seen the man before?"

"I told you he was masked with that hood!"

"A face isn't the only thing we remember. Did he seem at all familiar?"

The girl shrugged. "I'm not accustomed to moving in circles where The Black Phantom would likely to be found, Mr. Shayne."

"What about that night? In some of those bars you visited? Did you see him there?"

"How do I know? Those are terrible places. There were a lot of men looking at us. I didn't notice a man with a limp, or hear that voice. After all, we didn't know we were going to be attacked."

"Why did you go down there if those places are so terrible?"

The girl smiled through her swollen lips. "Didn't you ever want to go to terrible places? Gladys thought it would be fun."

Shayne tugged his ear. "Gladys thought? It was her idea?"

"Yes," Maureen said. "Poor Gladys."

"Why? Why did your step-mother want to do a round of clubs just with you?"

The girl grew angry. "If you're implying that there was anything wrong between Gladys and father you're crazy! All right, Father is a

lot older, and Gladys liked to go out. Father is a busy man."

"So he told me," Shayne said drily.

"Anyway, what are you asking all these stupid questions for? Do you really think The Black Phantom knows his victims? Why don't you go out and find him before he kills some other poor woman!?"

Before Shayne could answer, the door opened and two men came into the hospital room. When they saw Shayne they stopped in their tracks. The first, a tall young man wearing a rich grey sport jacket and dark slacks, stammered, "Oh, I am sorry. I didn't know Maureen had company. We'll—"

Maureen snorted. "Not company, Jacques. Just a detective. It seems father wants to give the police some help. I admit they seem to need it."

The second man said nothing. He just stood inside the door. He was also tall, but much heavier, almost paunchy, and older than the young man named Jacques. He wore a business suit that needed pressing as if he had slept in it. The young man stepped to Shayne with his hand out. His grip was strong, his hand was tanned by a lot of sun.

"Jacques St. George," the young man said.

"Shayne," the detective said, shaking St. George's hand.

Now the older man spoke. "Mike Shayne?"

"Yes." Shayne said, and he

looked at the older man in the wrinkled suit.

"I've heard of you, Shayne," the older man said. "My name is Haxton. I'm Harmon Rollins' lawyer."

"From the look of you, it's been a hard night and morning," Shayne said bluntly.

Maureen Rollins laughed through her swollen lips. "I'll bet father has been running Marlow ragged."

Marlow Haxton said nothing more, but the look on his face was enough. The lawyer had indeed had a hard night and morning. The young man, Jacques St. George, was not concerned with Haxton.

"Are you feeling a little better, Maureen?" St. George said.

"Yes, Jacques, and thank you," Maureen Rollins said. "I don't know what I would have done without you last night, Jacques. With poor Gladys . . . gone . . . and . . ."

Shayne had never seen anyone actually wring their hands. Jacques St. George wrung his hands, his face set in a mask of something close to despair. It was flamboyant, excessive, and yet—

Shayne looked at the handsome young man. Acting, yes, but not quite all an act. Shayne began to tug on his earlobe.

"A terrible thing," St. George said. "I can't really believe it even now."

"We both loved her, Jacques," Maureen Rollins said softly.

Shayne touched the shoulder of Marlow Haxton. The lawyer jumped. Haxton's rabbit eyes leaped around the room, glanced at Shayne. The detective motioned the lawyer out of the room.

"Let's leave the young people alone for a minute," Shayne said.

Haxton hesitated, shrugged, and the two men left the hospital room. Neither Jacques St. George nor Maureen Rollins seemed to notice them leave.

V

IN THE hospital corridor, Marlow Haxton lighted a cigarette and blew smoke nervously. Shayne also lighted a cigarette, and leaned against the white wall. Internes and nurses passed them curiously. The victim of The Black Phantom was a celebrity in the hospital.

Marlow Haxton took out his handkerchief and mopped his sweating brow. From the look of the lawyer's handkerchief he had been mopping his brow a great deal.

"Are the police any closer to him? The Black Phantom, I mean?" Haxton said. "They're making a lot of noise about it."

"A little," Shayne said. "I gather Harmon Rollins is giving you a hard time."

Haxton nodded. "All night. He's a powerful man, Shayne. He's taken this hard. I'd hate to be that mugger if Harmon got his hands on him."

Shayne pulled on his earlobe. "I can understand that, but what kept you so busy?"

"A lot of Harmon's holdings were in Gladys's name. I had to start work with our powers-of-attorney. Then, of course, there was her money."

"Her money?"

Haxton nodded. "She had quite a bundle of her own. I spent half the morning filing the will, getting probate started."

"This morning? Isn't that a little fast?" Shayne said.

Haxton shrugged. "Between you and me, Shayne, Harmon needs cash. He's broken up, but he's a businessman first. He didn't get

where he is by missing chances out of emotion."

"Rollins needed cash, and he gets her money?"

"Only part of it," Haxton said, stamping out his cigarette on the corridor floor. "Maureen gets a third, and Harmon gets a third, and Tom Bixby, her brother, gets a third."

"How much is it?" Shayne asked.

"A fair bundle. About $300,000," Haxton said.

"A hundred thousand dollars each? That's a pretty good bundle," Shayne said thoughtfully.

Haxton turned pale. The lawyer lighted another cigarette, waved his fleshy hands in protest.

"You're not suggesting—Why, damn it, Shayne, we know who killed her!" Haxton cried.

"Maybe," Shayne said.

"For God's sake, man, a hundred thousand is nothing to Harmon or Maureen. Harmon has fifty times that much in his holdings. Maureen has almost a million of her own from her mother!"

"I've found they always like more," Shayne said drily.

"Maureen is Harmon's sole heir now. She—"

"Yes," Shayne said. "Now she is."

"Really, Shayne, the girl was attacked!"

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. "You said Rollins needed cash."

"Not enough to murder for! He loved his wife. Damn it, Shayne, he doted on Gladys! Why if she even looked at—"

Haxton stopped, flushed, drew deeply on his cigarette. Shayne looked hard at the lawyer.

"Did she look at other men?"

Haxton was sullen. "Now and then, maybe. But—"

"Rollins claimed he was the perfectly understanding husband. You say different," Shayne said.

"Harmon is a normal man. He didn't like it if she played a little. But he's a brilliant man, too, and he knew the gap in age."

"Okay," Shayne said. "What about the brother?"

"Tom Bixby? Well, he could probably use the money," Haxton said. "I've heard he was in a little trouble. But he doesn't live in Miami. As far as I know he's in California. He lives in San Francisco. We notified him this morning, but we haven't heard from him yet."

"Which implies he wasn't in San Francisco last night," Shayne said.

"Possibly," Haxton said, "but damn it all, Maureen saw the man! Maureen was beaten and robbed, too. She was there!"

"I'm just ruling out suspects, Haxton," Shayne said. "I was hired to do a job and I'm doing it. What about yourself? Do you gain anything from Gladys Rollins' death?"

"Not a damned thing!" Haxton snapped, furious.

"All right. What was the value of the stuff stolen?"

Haxton laughed. "Peanuts. Gladys had about a hundred in cash in her purse; Maureen had maybe another hundred. They'd been spending, so they were low. The jewels add up to about three or four thousand dollars at best. Peanuts to the Rollinses, but probably a good haul to a mugger."

Shayne rubbed his left ear. He had to agree that Haxton was right. Three or four thousand dollars was a good haul for a common mugger, peanuts to anyone else. He remembered that the details of The Black Phantom's earlier attacks showed that the loot averaged only a few hundred dollars per attack.

The difference, the obvious jewels on the two women as they made their rounds of the seedy clubs, could account for The Black Phantom changing his procedure and attacking two women this time. It could also explain the death of Gladys Rollins.

"Was Mrs. Rollins the fighting type? Would she have fought for a few thousand dollars worth of jewelry?" Shayne asked.

"Apparently she did, the fool. She was the kind who liked to have what she wanted. She wasn't easily pushed around, and she had a temper."

Shayne nodded. It all fitted. And none of the possible motives for murder among those associated with the dead Gladys Rollins really held up. Unless the brother, Tom Bixby, proved to be a possible suspect. Maureen Rollins' description of The Black Phantom checked out, and the girl told a straight story.

Shayne led the way back into Maureen Rollins' hospital room. As he opened the door he saw Maureen and Jacques St. George close together. The girl was holding the man's hand. St. George had a wan smile on his tanned face.

"—I understand, Jacques," Maureen was saying. "I know what you're going through."

Then she saw Shayne. She smiled. St. George looked around and flushed. Maureen patted the handsome man's hand that she still held.

"Poor Jacques is very upset. I'm going to comfort him, aren't I, Jacques?" Maureen said.

"What nicer thing could you do?" St. George said.

"Jacques is going to help me recuperate, right?" Maureen said.

"Good for him," Shayne said drily.

He left them there still holding hands. But it was the face of Marlow Haxton he remembered as he walked along the hospital corridor and out to his car in the low afternoon sun. Haxton had been biting his lip, staring at the girl and Jacques St. George. Haxton seemed worried, but that was probably no more than the normal worry of

a rich man's lawyer when he saw the rich man's daughter getting cosy with a man.

Now, Shayne had more on his mind. Even a Black Phantom had to leave some trace. It was time he had a look at the scene of the mugging, and time he talked to a few bartenders.

VI

SHAYNE WENT down the list of clubs in the same order the women had last night. First *The Pirate Club,* and last *The Rum Bar.* He found nothing. No one admitted to seeing a man who fitted the description of The Black Phantom. Shayne had not really expected to find anything. Will Gentry's men could be trusted to do that part of the job accurately and completely.

The sun was low in the sky over the city when the redhead reached the mouth of the alley where the mugging had taken place. Already the alley itself was in shadow, the sun hidden by the buildings.

Shayne started at the spot of the attack, clearly visible from the police chalk marks still on the sidewalk and street.

He looked up and down the street. It was a street of old and dirty buildings, mostly warehouses. Most of the windows on the first floors were bricked up or heavily shuttered. The doors looked firmly locked.

There were two other cars parked on the street now in the late afternoon. There was no one standing or walking but himself.

On the deserted street he stared down at the police chalk marks. The position of the body was clear. Stains of dried blood were still on the sidewalk to show where her head had lain. Other chalk marks showed where Maureen had stood, less than three feet away. Shayne tugged hard on his left earlobe.

According to Maureen she had frozen, paralyzed, unable to move or help. That was a common psychological reaction; there was no reason to doubt her. On the other hand, if she had run, the killer would have been forced to chase her, and perhaps leave his first victim.

Gladys had been hit three times, which indicated a fight, a struggle. Yet the position of the body showed that if the attacker had been hiding in the alley, as Maureen said, then he took no more than two steps out to attack the women. Gladys may have struggled, but she had not run.

Shayne narrowed his hard grey eyes and stepped back to imagine the scene again. Only one sequence of events really fitted: The Black Phantom came out, hit Gladys Rollins, and the older woman had grabbed for the weapon. Having attacked two women this time, the Phantom would have been afraid that while he was struggling with the first woman, the

second would escape and raise the alarm.

Therefore, the mugger struck twice more and hard before Maureen could recover and run. Shayne pondered. It fitted all known facts—except two. Why had Gladys Rollins struggled after the first blow? Why were there no signs of a struggle—no marks of pursuit, no scuffle marks on the sidewalk, no report of screams being heard after the first single scream?

Shayne sighed aloud. If The Black Phantom had not killed Gladys Rollins during a struggle, why had he hit her three times? He had hit all his other victims, including Maureen Rollins, only once. Possibly he had hit Gladys, knocked her down, then hit Maureen. But Gladys recovered and he had to hit her again.

That made sense, except for one thing. There should have been more noise, more screams for help if Gladys had had a second chance. Again Shayne sighed. He would probably never know until The Black Phantom was caught and told. He turned and stepped into the mouth of the dim alley.

It was a narrow alley. At night it would be pitch dark. It ended in a dead end about forty feet back at the wall of a building—a windowless wall. There were two doors, both locked when Shayne tried them. There were a series of garbage cans outside one of the doors.

There was nothing else in the alley.

Shayne studied the alley. The Black Phantom must have spotted the two women earlier in the evening, and he must have known where their car was.

He slipped into the alley ahead of them and waited. That meant he had to have a position from where he could see them coming yet not be seen himself.

Shayne moved around the alley looking for a likely spot. It had to be along the right wall facing the street. After trying six or seven spots along the right wall he found the doorway next to the garbage cans to be the only really practical spot.

From there, some fifteen feet of the street was visible, and the single street lamp would reveal anyone coming when they were about twelve feet away.

Back inside the small doorway

there was just enough depth for a man in black to be totally invisible. If Shayne had been a mugger waiting for his victims, he would have stood inside the narrow doorway.

He began to search the ground around the doorway. At first he found nothing that could not have been there for a thousand reasons. The garbage cans were close; almost anything could have fallen out. Then he bent close to the earth. The alley was paved with cobblestones, but some had worked loose, and just around the sill of the doorway there was a patch of bare earth. The earth was wet, and in the wet earth there was a faint footmark.

Shayne stared down at the footmark. It was not an entire footprint, the heel having rested on the door sill, and it was very faint. It could, of course, have been made by almost anyone coming in or out the doorway. That was undoubtedly what Gentry's men had decided. As evidence it would be useless. But it was an indication, and Shayne stared at it.

In the first place, it was a left foot. Shayne tested, and found that to make even that faint a print he had to put his weight on his left leg.

And the print was far over to the right as you came out of the door, even though it was a left foot. Again Shayne tested. He decided that it was a thousand-to-one against the print being made in that spot by someone just stepping out through the door. No, it had to have been made by a man standing inside the doorway, pressed up against the right side of the narrow doorway.

Shayne was sure it was the footprint of The Black Phantom. And he continued to stare at it. Even without the heel, he could see that it was the print of a small foot. Much smalled than his foot. A small left foot. Tugging harder on his earlobe, he bent closer and pawed over the ground. Then he found what he wanted.

Three stripped cigarette butts—and three wooden matches. The ends of the matches had been heavily chewed, all three of them. And the end that had been chewed was the charred end.

For a long time Shayne stood and looked at the three matches and the stripped butts.

Then he turned and walked out of the alley.

VII

IN HIS CAR he checked over the typed transcript Lieutenant Bruce had given him. By the overhead light, and the copper glow of the setting sun, he checked the transcript three times. It always came out the same. After the first attack, at the end of the month four months ago, there had been three a month.

No attack in the first week of any month, and then three spaced from six to eight days apart—until this last one. The attack last night had come in the first week of the month, and only four days since the last one.

Shayne lighted a cigarette. The first killing; the first attack on two women; the largest haul of loot; and the only attack in the first week of a month.

Shayne started his motor and drove to the nearest tavern. Inside he went straight to the telephone booth. Lieutenant Bruce answered at once.

"Bruce? This is Mike Shayne. Listen, do you have a record of the activities of everyone connected to Gladys and Maureen Rollins last night?"

"Activities? Well—" There was a pause. Then, "What's on your mind, Shayne?"

"I'm not sure, Bruce," Shayne said. "But I've got a small hunch. Did you happen to check out the pattern of The Black Phantom?"

There was another silence. "I checked it, all right. This one last night doesn't fit in a lot of ways. We figure it's just another sign of him getting careless, stepping up his operations."

"You believe that?" Shayne barked into the telephone.

"I do now, Mike," Bruce said slowly. "At first I gave it a real look, but now I think what happened was that our boy just saw all that loot walking and couldn't resist. So he broke his pattern to make a big heist."

"What changed your first thoughts?" Shayne said.

Bruce breathed heavily on the other end. "I had the same hunch, only they all checked out. They all have alibis, air-tight. Even the brother, Tom Bixby."

"What kind of alibis?" Shayne said slowly.

"Harmon Rollins was in a business meeting. Ten witnesses to that. Jacques St. George was in a gym, sweating out a drunk. The lawyer, Haxton was with Rollins. Maureen, of course, was getting herself attacked. She couldn't have hit herself, the ME is sure of it. Bixby was here in Miami. He still is. But he was in plain sight in a bar and has plenty of witnesses."

Bruce could not see it, but in the telephone booth of the tavern Shayne nodded as if he had expected just this. His grey eyes were seeing something as if far off, far beyond the narrow space of the dark telephone booth.

"All right, Bruce, and thanks," Shayne said.

"Hold on! If you have anything I don't have, Mike, you better tell me!" Bruce said.

"When I have something real," Shayne said, and hung up.

For a moment he remained inside the telephone booth, his heavy jaw set in thought, his fingers running through his shock of thick

red hair. Then he nodded to himself and left the booth. He left the tavern and drove to the first of the series of clubs the two women had visited last night. In *The Pirate Club* the bartender was not helpful until Shayne laid a large ten dollar bill on the bar.

"Okay," the bartender said, pocketing the bill. "I remember those two. Why not? We don't often get them that high class looking, or wearing all those rocks, you know. Only I don't remember no small guy looking at them. I mean, a lot of guys was looking."

The Biscayne Buzzard was not better. The bartender also remembered the women, and the men who had looked at them.

"A small man," Shayne said. "Black clothes, chewed on the tips of wooden matches."

"Sounds like Al Vincent, only he wasn't around," the bartender said slowly.

"Al Vincent is who I want. Would you tell me if he had been here?" Shayne said.

"No," the bartender said. "Al is not nice people."

"How much?"

"You don't have enough," the bartender said.

Shayne left. He had been sure that the small man who chewed matches was Al Vincent, and Vincent was a known hired killer! No one had yet proven this, but Al was only twenty-four. The next bartender he talked to had a little more courage—enough to tell Shayne to try *The Rum Bar*.

In his car again, Shayne was grim. *The Rum Bar*. It was beginning to fit a very nasty pattern of its own. *The Rum Bar* was the last club the two women had visited, and it was apparently a place where Al Vincent hung out. This time the detective tried the tough routine.

"Al Vincent," he snapped at the barman. "I'm looking for him. He was in here last night, late?"

"Al? He was in here all night, copper," the barman said.

Shayne grinned.

"Thanks," he said.

Again he left. There would be time later to get a description of what the small hired gun was wearing. Now he had another connection to make. He drove hard through the dark night, across the Causeway, and into Miami Beach. He pulled to a stop in front of Ray Incavo's best club.

As he strode through the bar toward the stairs to Incavo's private office, Shayne saw the consternation he always caused in the fat gambler's places. Hard-looking men were running for telephones, for stairs up, to the doors. He paid no attention until two of them appeared in his path at the top of the stairs.

"Social call, boys," Shayne said. "Just announce me."

The two bodyguards neither spoke nor smiled. One of them

stood leaning against a wall and staring at Shayne. The other went somewhere. Shayne lighted a cigarette and waited against the railing at the top of the stairs. He could have forced his way, but he wanted a cooperative Ray Incavo this time.

The hood returned. "Let's go," he said.

Shayne followed along the plush and sound-proofed corridor to an unmarked door. The door opened with a buzz. Shayne stepped inside and the door closed behind him with the two hoods leaning against it. Shayne looked at the small, stocky man at the desk. Incavo was sweating, as usual. Shayne smiled.

"A new set-up? All the self opening, unmarked door bit?" Shayne said.

"You got to keep up with the times, Shayne," Incavo said.

"I hope you didn't do it because I had to kick the door in the last time," Shayne said, still grinning.

"Partly," Incavo said. "Okay, Shayne, what's on your mind. A social call from you means questions."

"And answers," Shayne said.

"Let's hear the questions," Incavo said.

"Al Vincent—does he hang around in any of your casinos?"

Incavo did not even blink. "Next question, shamus."

Shayne leaned down over the big desk. Incavo blinked, sweated. The fat gambler always sweated; his life was like that. Shayne spoke low and urgent.

"Look, Incavo, Al Vincent is no one's friend. He's a mad dog; you know that. A man like that is as dangerous to you as to me or the police, maybe more. I think I've got something on him. You don't have to tell me anything or get involved. All I want to know is if he comes around to your places and gambles. That much I could find out myself by watching if I had time."

Incavo looked up at Shayne. The fat gambler seemed to be trying to find the trap in Shayne's words. Finally, Incavo nodded.

"Okay. He gambles a lot. He comes into my places," Incavo said.

"All right," Shayne said, still leaning down toward the gambler behind the desk. "Now what about Harmon Rollins, his wife and daughter Maureen?"

"Rollins likes a fling sometimes," Incavo said steadily. "I never saw the wife. The daughter is a regular. She loses big, wins big. She likes the excitement, but she's a bad loser. The old man plays like a snake. He's good. He loses good and wins good."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully "Marlow Haxton?"

"The lawyer? No. He doesn't gamble—not the type. He used to come in for a drink sometimes. He had a row with old man Rollins once about the wife."

"A row? In here?"

"Right in the bar," Incavo said.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Haxton had failed to mention any interest he had in the dead woman.

"What about Jacques St. George?"

Incavo grinned. "Handsome Jack? He likes a free buck. He's a nail-biter, bad loser. He plays roulette only, red-black, odd-even. A small-timer."

"And Tom Bixby?"

"There was a Tom Bixby used to play sometimes, a real plunger. Not for a couple of years. I heard he left town."

Shayne straightened up. All of them. It was not surprising. Gambling tended to run in a group, a family. People who liked the same things got together. Gambling was a favorite pastime of rich Miamians. But what he needed was the connection.

The connection between Al Vincent, a small-time hired killer, and the family of the dead Gladys Rollins.

Now he needed one more detail, and the shortest way between two points was a straight line. He left Incavo's office and went out into the night and walked to his car. Now he wanted to talk to Al Vincent.

VIII

ON HIS WAY back to *The Rum Bar,* Shayne stopped and made a

telephone call. He called *The Rum Bar,* spoke to the bartender.

"Listen," Shayne said urgently when the bartender came on the line. "I want to talk to Al Vincent. If he shows, hold him there. There's a hundred bucks in it for you."

Then he hung up and ran to his car. He drove fast to *The Rum Bar.* But he did not go in. He did not leave his car. He parked in the shadows of the dark waterfront street a half a block from the front door of the seedy Club.

Shayne lighted a cigarette and waited, trying to curb his tension.

An hour passed.

Two hours.

Then he saw a small man walk into the club. He snubbed out his cigarette in the car ashtray and waited. He did not have to wait long.

The small man came hurrying out of *The Rum Bar* and looked

sharply around. Shayne's car was hidden in shadows. Moments later a taxi drove up and the small man jumped in. The taxi drove off fast. Shayne eased out from the curb in pursuit.

As he drove, Shayne smiled to himself. The bartender had acted exactly as he had expected. The bartender had warned Al Vincent that someone was looking for him. Now Vincent was alarmed. An alarmed man tended to run to cover, and to worry about just what he was wanted for. With any luck, Vincent would lead Shayne to his hideout. In the hideout there might be some evidence.

Shayne followed with care, turning out his lights from time to time when he thought it safe. That way, if Vincent saw him, the hired killer would think he had turned off. He did not want Vincent to see lights behind him all the way.

Luckily, Al Vincent was a city boy. The taxi never left the crowded streets, and pulled up finally before a shabby hotel in a poor section of Miami.

Shayne drove on past, his head turned away, and parked around the first corner. He walked back fast to the entrance to the hotel. At the entrance he stood back out of sight. Vincent stood at the tiny hotel desk. The clerk reached for a key. Shayne counted the boxes from the left in the row. Vincent went up the stairs.

From where he stood hidden outside, Shayne watched the small man pause in the shadows at the top of the stairs. Vincent was checking to see if anyone was following him. Shayne could wait as long as Vincent. At last, the small man continued on up the stairs and out of sight. Still Shayne waited. He gave himself five more minutes. Then he walked into the dingy lobby. He mussed his red hair and staggered slightly. He beamed blearily at the desk clerk.

"Whoo, what a night," he grinned, swaying, "Little sleep, yeh."

"Three dollars a day," the clerk said, barely looking at him. "No booze in the room."

"Yeh," Shayne said.

"Sign here," the clerk said, yawning.

Shayne scrawled a name, took his key, and turned to sway toward the stairs. His quick eyes had counted the boxes from the left in the second row and found Al Vincent's room: 212.

He mounted the stairs slowly and noisily. His room was on the third floor. He bumped on up past the second floor and went into his room. He fell heavily on the bed, laughed, "Whoo-ie!"

He lay there for another five minutes. Then, silently, he got up and crossed the room on catlike feet and went back out into the corridor. Quickly he went down the stairs to the second floor. He crept up silently to the door of room 212.

At the door he listened. Someone moved around inside.

Shayne drew his automatic. He stepped back. He raised his right foot and aimed it squarely at the door just below the lock. He had to hit it just right. Al Vincent would not stand idle if the door did not open at the first kick. Shayne steadied.

The two shots came loud.

A first shot, and then moments later a second shot.

Both shots were inside the room.

Shayne froze for a split minute with his foot raised. Thrown off balance, he recovered, steadied his foot again, and kicked hard against the door.

His automatic in front of him, he jumped through the open door into the room, crouched and ready.

Al Vincent stood in the center of the room.

The small hired-killer looked at Shayne.

Vincent reached out as if to steady himself against something. He found the brass bedstead. He held onto the bedstead. Then he fell over backwards and lay still. His eyes stared up at the cracked ceiling of the cheap room. He was dead.

Shayne cursed and ran for the window. But too much time had passed. He managed one wild shot at the shadowy figure that ran from the foot of the fire escape and out of the alley behind the hotel.

He whirled and strode to the fallen Vincent. At first he could not find the wounds. There was little blood. Then he saw the two holes. They were small, in the back. Neither bullet had come out. At least one had hit the dead man's heart. From the size of them they were .22 caliber or .25 caliber.

Shayne swore again. He had been just minutes too late. He holstered his automatic and began to search the room. In the closet he found a complete outfit of black clothes: trousers, shirt, shoes, socks —and a hood tucked away on the top of the closet shelf.

In the back of the closet, on the floor, he found a large box. It was locked. He broke it open and saw Al Vincent's arsenal. A forty-five automatic, two .38 caliber pistols, a Luger, two hunting knives—and two lengths of iron pipe, one wrapped tightly in black cloth.

He found nothing else. He searched, but beyond another Luger on the body of the dead Al Vincent, he found nothing. And now time was important. The killer was panicky. On the run. The killer could not be sure Vincent was dead, or who had broken into the room.

Shayne needed only one more fact—a motive.

Without another look at the body of Al Vincent, Shayne left the room and went back to his car around the corner. The desk clerk barely noticed him, the two shots from the small caliber pistol going

unnoticed in the shabby and noisy hotel.

In his car he drove straight to the home of Marlow Haxton.

IX

HAXTON lived in a good house in an elegant section of Miami. From the address, it could not be far from the mansion of Harmon Rollins.

"Harmon likes his minions within call," Haxton said drily as he ushered Shayne into his impressive living room. "Drink?"

"A little cognac would do," Shayne said.

"Remy Martin?" Haxton said.

"Thanks," Shayne said.

The fat lawyer poured three good fingers into a glass and gave the small glass to Shayne. Then Haxton poured another three fingers for himself. He waved Shayne to a seat on the ultra-modern tweed-and-wood couch. The lawyer sat down in an armchair facing the redhead.

"What cooks, Shayne?" Haxton said.

Shayne drank. The cognac was excellent. Haxton did himself well. Casually, Shayne drank again, looked at the glass with appreciation.

"Murder, Haxton," Shayne said. "This is about murder."

Haxton seemed to freeze. "Murder? You mean the attack of The Black Phantom?"

"The Black Phantom didn't kill anyone, Haxton," Shayne said bluntly.

The fat lawyer put down his glass and took out a large white handkerchief. Haxton mopped his brow. The lawyer was sweating. Haxton's eyes looked at Shayne. They had the look of a hunted animal in them, a small and vulnerable animal.

"You have to be wrong, Shayne," the lawyer said at last. "Who in hell would kill Gladys and why?"

Shayne drank again. "Why is the question I still have to answer. We know you all gained money. That is, all except you and Handsome Jack."

Haxton managed a smile. "I see you have been checking on us. Yes, they call him Handsome Jack, and he gains nothing by Gladys's death. But I do gain money, in a way, Shayne."

"You?" Shayne said sharply.

Haxton shrugged. "You'd find out if you dug a little more. I'm surprised you don't know. You see, Gladys didn't like me. She was a hard woman, really, and she took a dislike to me. I expected to be eased out of Harmon's set-up any time."

The lawyer waved his hands to indicate the rich room. "As you can see, I live high, and that is all based on my work for Rollins Enterprises. So her death probably saved me a lot of money."

"And you're telling me?" Shayne said.

"Yes, because I didn't kill Gladys," Haxton said. He looked at Shayne. "I don't think any of us would have killed for money. We're not weak enough or strong enough for that kind of murder."

"Not even Bixby?" Shayne said.

"Then how about love?" Shayne said.

Haxton opened his mouth, and closed it. He tried once more to speak. On his third try, the fat lawyer managed to say something.

"Love? What do—"

"I've learned you and Gladys Rollins played some games and Rollins didn't like it," Shayne said bluntly.

"Where did you hear—" Haxton exploded, and stopped. Now the lawyer was red instead of pale. "All right, yes, but that was some years ago. As a matter of fact I threw her over. That was why she was down on me!"

"You threw her over?"

"Yes, damn it, I did. I may not look like much, but I threw her over. As soon as Rollins began to guess. You don't think I was going to throw away my position at Rollins Enterprise, do you?"

Shayne grimaced. "You're a nice man."

"I never claimed to be. Gladys and I had a fling, Rollins began to get a hint, and I ended it. That may not be true love, or very nice, but I like my money!"

Shayne stared at the fat lawyer. His grey eyes bored into the man. Haxton shifted in his seat, mopped his sweating face.

"That could be true, or you could have been jealous," Shayne said harshly. "It could have been Gladys who threw you over, and you were jealous, and you killed her!"

"Jealous? Of Handsome Jack! Don't make me laugh. Why—"

Shayne sat up very straight. He placed his empty glass on a coffee table in front of him. Haxton saw the look on the redhead's face and stopped in mid sentence.

Shayne leaned forward, his grey eyes like points of steel. "Jacques St. George was having a romance with Mrs. Rollins?"

Haxton nodded. "A big item. Torrid, from what I hear. But they were careful."

"For how long?" Shayne said.

"Who knows? A year at least. It wasn't unusual for her. There were others before me, and after me."

"Who else heard about it?" Shayne said.

"Everyone, I imagine. Like I said, they were careful, but word gets around," Haxton said.

"Bixby? Maureen? Rollins himself?"

Haxton laughted. "Bixby even flew in once to talk to her. Tom wasn't losing Harmon as a brother-in-law if he could help it. Maureen probably introduced them. As for Harmon, he doesn't miss much. But Harmon knew all about her escapades, if you think he would kill for that."

"So he told me," Shayne said drily. "But I wonder how true it is? I think we'll have a little talk with all of them. Call Rollins and tell him to meet us at the hospital. And do you know how we get to Bixby?"

"Bixby's staying at the Rollins house for the funeral," Haxton said. "But why the hospital?"

"We'll need Maureen," Shayne said.

"She's at home," Haxton said. "She left the hospital this afternoon. Harmon hired nurses at home, just in case, but she's not badly hurt."

"Good," Shayne said. "Then let's make a call on the bereaved family."

Haxton went out to his car. In his own car, Shayne checked his automatic, and placed a small, rectangular box into his pocket. Then he started the motor and followed Haxton's red convertible out onto the highway toward the home of Harmon Rollins.

X

THEY SAT IN the enormous living room of the three story old mansion set on fifty acres of the best Miami property. Maureen Rollins, wrapped in a blanket from the waist down, a nurse hovering behind her, and her face a mask of bruises and black eyes. Rollins himself, as peppery as ever.

Shayne, I hired you to work on this, but does that mean you have to disturb my family!" the older man demanded.

"I'm afraid it does," Shayne said simply.

Jacques St. George hovered over Maureen, as attentive as the nurse, but the tall, handsome man did not appear at his ease. Haxton was in stalled in a chair as far from Harmon Rollins as he could get and still look like a legal guardian. Only the blond, short, very average-looking man seated on the couch seemed out of it all. Shayne let his eyes stray to the face of this stranger—Tom Bixby.

"Are you implying that—" Harmon Rollins began.

"That The Black Phantom did not kill your wife," Shayne said. "That's just what I'm implying. As

a matter of fact, it's my guess that The Black Phantom isn't even in Miami, and won't be until tomorrow at the earliest!"

There was a heavy silence. Haxton was the first to find his power of speech. The fat lawyer seemed puzzled.

"You mean you know who The Black Phantom is?" Haxton said.

"No," Shayne said, "but I know who he isn't! He isn't the man who attacked Maureen and Mrs. Rollins. You see, the pattern was wrong all along. Muggers have an MO, and the police will tell you that, within certain limits, very few criminals ever deviate from their MO.

"In this case the deviation wasn't really much at first. A killing that could have been just bad luck, and an attack on two women instead of one. The police think he deviated because he was getting over confident, and because he saw a really good haul on Maureen and Mrs. Rollins.

"But then I did some more checking, and I found some pretty good leads to another killer. Then I got to thinking about last night. I checked dates. You see, last night was too close to the last attack, and it was way out of the pattern. I'll shorten it down for you, but the pattern of The Black Phantom indicates that he is a man who comes to Miami at regular intervals, and never in the first week of any month!"

Maureen Rollins exclaimed. "And last night is right in the first week of the month! How smart!"

Haxton protested. "That's pretty flimsy, Shayne. The man might just have happened to show up this time."

"Possible, but not probable," Shayne said. "And I have to work on probability. Most of the time it holds up. In this case probability gave me doubts, and that started me looking for what I found."

"What did you find, Mr. Shayne?" Tom Bixby said suddenly.

Shayne looked at the brother of the dead woman. They were all staring at Mike Shayne now. Harmon Rollins seemed stunned. Jacques St. George had his mouth open. Even the nurse was waiting behind the battered Maureen.

"I found evidence, of an unknown killer," Shayne said. "That is, unknown as the killer of Mrs. Rollins, but pretty well known as a killer. One Al Vincent, a paid murderer. I can prove he was the man in that alley, and the man who attacked Maureen and Mrs. Rollins."

Shayne stopped and waited. Harmon Rollins exploded on cue. The peppery business man roared his anger.

"Then where is he? Have you arrested him? I'll see that he gets all that's coming to him!" Rollins cried.

"I'm sure you would, but he's al-

ready got all he can get. He's dead. He was killed by the real murderer of Mrs. Rollins!"

Shayne waited while his bombshell dropped, sank in. He watched them all, and, unseen, touched a button on the rectangular box in his pocket.

Harmon Rollins was the first to speak this time. The husband of the dead woman had gone almost as white as his hair.

"The—real murderer?" Rollins said. "You actually mean that Gladys was—"

"Murdered," Shayne finished for him. "In cold blood, no robbery involved. I found the black hood and clothes in Vincent's room, also the pipe. I expect the jewels will turn up in the room somewhere, or where he hid them. They were sort of fringe benefit."

Marlow Haxton stood up. "You're saying, Shayne, that you think someone hired a man to kill Gladys. Someone hired a man to act like The Black Phantom and kill Mrs. Rollins."

"I'm more than suggesting," Shayne said.

Haxton walked to Rollins. "I advise against anyone saying anything else! Shayne means one of us! Mr. Rollins, as your lawyer—"

Harmon Rollins swore. "As my lawyer, shut up! If someone here killed my wife and attacked my daughter, I want to know it!"

"Are you sure you want to know, Rollins?" Shayne said.

Rollins looked at him. "Why, of course I—" The white-haired man stopped, looked at Shayne. "You know who it was?"

"Yes, Mr. Rollins, I know. Under the circumstances it could be only one person. Anyway, I can prove it. You see, Al Vincent was a small, thin man. He had no limp, and his voice was high and thin."

There was a laugh, a girlish laugh.

"He means me, Father," Maureen Rollins said. "I described The Black Phantom as the attacker, and Mr. Shayne says The Black Phantom wasn't the attacker. So I must be lying."

"You went too far," Shayne said. "You described all the characteristics that had been printed in the newspapers, and you did not add anything. Very careless. You should have at least added one new thing to what he looked like. It was too neat.

"Then you had to imply there was a fight. You knew the police would wonder about the first killing by the mugger. Only there wasn't a fight; nothing indicates a fight. Your hired killer, Al Vincent, hit Gladys three times for no reason while you stood there. Then he hit you once to make it look good."

Maureen smiled from her chair. "Guesses, Mr. Shayne. How would I know this Al Vincent?"

"He hangs around Ray Incavo's joints, or he did. I'm sure we can find someone who saw you talk to

him," Shayne said. "If we needed it. But we don't. You see—"

"You're not going to try to tell me Vincent isn't dead? Oh, no, I won't fall for that. I know he's dead, I saw—"

"You saw where you shot him," Shayne said. "True, and he is dead, but a .25 caliber or a .22 caliber doesn't hit hard. He died, but before he died he had a chance to talk. You know I was right behind you. I shot at you. He told me all—"

Everyone in the room looked into the tiny barrel of the .25 caliber automatic in Maureen Rollins's hand. The girl had quietly pulled it out from beneath the blanket covering her lap.

Shayne nodded as he saw it. "I thought so," he said. "You had to be scared after I shot at you. I thought you would keep it."

"Very intelligent," Maureen said.

"Tell me—did you plan to kill him, or was it just a sudden thought?" Shayne said.

"Father had to hire you! Stupid! I knew you suspected, you were asking all those questions! So I had to kill Vincent. I couldn't let—"

It was Bixby who jumped. The short brother of the dead woman had slowly edged around until he was close to the girl. Then he jumped. She swung the pistol. The small weapon shot once. Then Shayne was all over her.

Bixby lay on the floor, a flesh

wound in his shoulder. The girl lay in the chair, panting like an insane animal. Shayne held the pistol. On the floor, Bixby shouted.

"You animal! Why? Why kill her!"

Maureen bared her battered teeth, her bruised face a mask of hatred. "She took Jacques! You hear? She cheated on father, and she took Jacques from me! With her dead he'd come back to me! I knew he would, and he did! Didn't you, Jacques! You do love me? With her dead I had a chance!"

Jacques St. George looked horrified. The tall, handsome man edged away from the girl, looking neither very tall nor very handsome. It was obvious that St. George had never even guessed.

Shayne nodded sadly. "I thought it was something like that. So you saw all this mugging and hired Vincent to—"

Harmon Rollins broke in. "Don't say any more!" The peppery man stood beside his daughter and glared at Shayne. "How

much, Shayne? How much to forget everything?"

"No, Rollins," Shayne said. "She's a double killer."

"You have no proof! Not with Vincent dead. And no one here will say anything. I'll see damned well to that!"

Rollins glared around at all the faces.

Shayne shook his head. "I don't think you'll silence them, Rollins, not even with all your money. But it doesn't matter. This pistol will convict her for Vincent's murder, and for the rest, I have this."

He took the small rectangular box from his pocket. A wire led from the box to a round tie-pin on his tie.

"A miniature tape-recorder," Shayne said. "I had an idea you might try to silence everyone when you found out your wife had been killed by your precious daughter."

There was another silence. The nurse worked on Tom Bixby. Maureen began to cry now. Harmon Rollins sat down, his head in his hands. Mike Shayne walked to the telephone.

* * *

WILL GENTRY chewed on his cigar and eyed Shayne in the morning sun of his big office. Shayne was red-eyed from lack of sleep.

"She just read the papers and saw a chance to get rid of her rival," Gentry said. "Stupid. St. George doesn't give a damn about her and never did. She just wanted him."

"She blamed her step-mother for stealing him," Shayne said. "She hated Gladys. I suppose Rollins will try to get her off on insanity."

"When did you first guess?" Gentry asked.

"The moment I knew The Black Phantom hadn't done the killing," Shayne said. "She described the wrong man. It had to be her. It must have seemed so simple, so certain to her. Who would question another Black Phantom killing?"

"Lucky for me, you did," Gentry said. "And now we have to get the real Black Phantom."

"Look at trains, airplanes, boats, anything that comes into Miami on a regular schedule. Trucking lines, maybe. Look for a man who comes to Miami about every week for two days or so, and never the first week of the month."

"Tell me more," Gentry said morosely.

"I've solved my case, Will. The Black Phantom is your case," Shayne said.

He was still laughing at the scowl on Gentry's face as he walked out into the morning sun and got into his car.

Lieutenant Malloy was brilliant at guessing . . . which way a crook would jump.

THE CALCULATED RISK

by FRED S. TOBEY

THE LIGHTED PHONE booth was a beacon at the end of the murky alley. A vague shape moved toward it in the deep shadows, came suddenly into the circle of light and was revealed to be only a small and furtive man, not fearsome at all.

The man looked anxiously up at the source of the light in the booth, reaching toward it as if to see if he could turn it off or break it. But the frosted dome was protected by heavy wire, and he quickly drew his hand back. He took a coin from his pocket, put it in the slot of the telephone and began to dial. He was half through dialing when his darting glance caught the silhouette of two figures rounding the corner at the far end of the alley.

Detective Lieutenant Malloy and the rookie broke into a run when they saw their quarry in the phone booth, but they were fifty yards away and he was only a few steps from the avenue. It took the man only a moment to get out of the booth and around the corner. As he ran he fumbled a gun out of the pocket of his topcoat and fired a single warning shot over the heads of the two policemen, who promptly slowed up.

"Well, what do you know!" said the lieutenant, puffing from the effort of pushing his heavy

bulk up the alley, "The little fellow has got himself a pistol!"

Malloy unslung his own revolver and proceeded, but with greater caution. "Get back to the car and bring it around here," he said to the rookie. "Tell headquarters the man is shooting and heading for the warehouse yards. We'll need some help to root him out."

THEY GOT THE help, lots of it, but in the end it was Detective Lieutenant Malloy and the rookie, still working together, who captured the scared embezzler the following day. It really was not surprising that it took that long to find him. The disrict was a rats' nest of warehouses and dingy apartments, and there were innumerable corners for a man to crawl into. But hunger drove the fugitive to look for food, and someone reported seeing him go into an apartment through an unlocked back door, after no one answered his knock.

The two policemen came crept onto the porch, and through the dirty glass of a window next to the door they saw the man standing by a kitchen table, drinking milk from a glass and wolfing slices of ham. He must have had his gun in his hand when he went in, for he had laid it on the table, within easy reach.

Both policemen had their revolvers ready.

"Smash the glass," whispered the rookie, "and if he goes for his gun, let him have a slug in the leg."

"Just let him eat a minute, now," said the lieutenant. "I don't care much for shooting at scared rabbits."

The man finished his milk, opened the refrigerator and took out a half-gallon bottle, from which he refilled the glass. Then he turned back toward the open refrigerator with the bottle.

Lieutenant Malloy's muscles tensed. "Now!" he said. "Cover me through the window!"

The door nearly came off its hinges as the big policeman plunged into the kitchen, and in a matter of seconds the fugitive was safely in handcuffs.

"You were crazy to go in there like that, I still claim," said the rookie a few hours later. They were sitting in a very old restaurant in the city, drinking dark beer from very large earthen steins —which was no business of anybody's because they were off duty. "He could have got to his gun before you had your hands on him."

"But he didn't, you'll notice. He shoved the milk bottle back on the shelf and slammed the ice box door and then he turned to get his gun, and by that time I had the arm lock half on him. It was a calculated risk, and it paid off."

"It was a risk, all right. But I

can't see where there was any calculating."

"Is that so, now? Let me tell you something. A man that's been acting a certain way all his life is going to act that way when the pressure is on him. You'll recall the bank manager said no employee had ever been more steady or regular than this man. Well, a neat little man with regular habits may be very good at embezzling. I have no doubt this one was very capable at it, and he also was neat and orderly about his plans for getting away with the bundle, you may recall. Airline ticket all in order.

"He would have got away clean with his forty grand if the fog hadn't come rolling in off the water that afternoon and cancelled all the flights. Right then he was out of his depth. A good crook has to think fast and move fast when the picture changes. This man has made a production out of being neat all his life. He has to do things just so, in the proper order."

The rookie looked thoughful but dubious. "You want me to think you figured this guy would put the bottle away before he reached for the gun," he said. "Well, I can't buy it. Admitting a man might guess what some close friend would do under pressure, that doesn't say you could do the same for a stranger, even if somebody told you he was a nut for being neat, and so on.

"You never laid eyes on this man until you saw him trying to get a phone call through to his girl friend last night. When you rammed into that kitchen this morning, you had no way to guess he wouldn't just let go of that jug and grab for the gun."

"Is that a fact, now?" said Detective Lieutenant Malloy. "May I ask if you happened to notice what the little man did when he caught sight of us running up the alley to that phone booth last night?"

"Notice? Sure I did. He dropped the phone, jumped out of the booth—"

"Wrong," said Malloy. "Try it again."

"Oh, come on. I could see him as clear as if he was in a spotlight."

"Wrong just the same. He *hung up* the phone and jumped out of the booth."

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL NEXT ISSUE

JOCKO CALDWELL needed a fix. His runny nose and moist eyes testified to it. His frequent sneezes and cavernous yawns provided further evidence. Perspiration stood on his forehead, although Randall's office was quite cool. And his mouth, its trembling visible ten feet away, was contorted with pain.

Jocko said, "Honest, Lieutenant. I don't know who the pusher was. It was dark. I just handed him

FELONY IN THE FAMILY

He was only a junkie, looking for a little fix. But the crime wave he triggered was too big for one station house to handle.

by JAMES HOLDING

my money and took the delivery. I never even seen his face."

Randall realized that he was probably telling the truth—narcotics users picked up by the police on possession charges are seldom able, even if willing, to furnish much useful information about their sources of supply.

The lieutenant sighed. What he was doing outraged every decent instinct he had, but it was a part of his job. He tried to keep his sympathy for Jocko Caldwell from showing as he stared at him grimly. Slowly he tapped against his desk top the paper-covered bundle of heroin that had been found in Jocko's pocket. Jocko's glance followed it desperately.

"Come on, Jocko, tell me who he was," Randall said. "Then you get your fix." He held the small packet out toward Jocko.

Jocko said, "The shape I'm in, don't you think I'd tell you if I knew?" He sneezed.

Randall tried another line.

"If you can't tell me anything about the pusher, tell me where you got the money to buy this junk," he said. "I know it comes high. And you're not exactly a millionaire."

Caldwell squirmed in his chair.

"I had a job until two months ago, Lieutenant," he said with an attempt at dignity. "I was making good money."

"True," said Randall. "Night watchman at the brewery. But all that money went long since for dope. Where'd you scrape up the dough to buy this latest supply? You were dead broke two weeks ago. I know that."

"I borrowed a hundred bucks from an old friend," Jocko muttered.

"An old friend?" Randall's eyes bored mercilessly at Caldwell without blinking. "And who might this friend be?"

"What's the difference? He lent

me the money for old time's sake. He's a respectable guy, Lieutenant. He wouldn't want his name mentioned in a police inquiry. You know that."

"Only too well. But we can't let that stand in the way of progress, can we? Even if his respectable feelings are hurt, Jocko. What's his name?" Randall tapped the heroin packet against the desk a little more rapidly.

"I don't have to tell you." Defiance tightened Caldwell's thin jaw. Then he yawned helplessly, and tried to still the trembling of his lips by putting a hand over them. "Why do you want to know, anyway?"

"It's very simple." Randall spoke slowly and patiently, as though to a slightly retarded child. "Narcotics addicts will usually go to any lengths to get enough money to support their habit. Right? And frequently the lengths they go to are criminal. Right? That's where it becomes our business, Jocko. So lots of our unsolved crimes are committed by junkies like you to keep the monkey on their backs from scratching too hard. Maybe you committed some of Circleville's unsolved crimes to get the money you paid for this dope. That's why I want to know your generous pal's name, Jocko. Call it official curiosity if you like. But come up with the name—if you're not lying."

"Lying!" Jocko struggled with another yawn. "I don't lie. You know it. And I'm trying to kick this habit, Lieutenant. My friend had no idea what the money he lent me was going for. I swear it. He just thought I was down on my luck, losing my job and all."

"Stop bleeding for him. All I want's his name. And then—pop! —you're flying again, Jocko." Randall tossed the heroin to Jocko.

Jocko scrambled to catch it. With it safe in his head, he could resist no longer.

"His name's Corsini," he muttered, dropping his head and staring at the heroin packet. "Paul Corsini. He's a mechanic in the Central Garage on State Street."

"Half a block away!" Randall nodded, pleased. He gave instructions to have Corsini brought in.

Ten minutes later, a plainclothes detective led a puzzled young man into Randall's office. Corsini was six feet tall and muscular; his hair was black and shiny; his fingernails were black, too, from the grease of a recent motor tune-up. Randall thought his mild blue eyes looked honest.

"Corsini?" he said, waving the boy to a chair that Caldwell had but recently vacated. "I'm Lieutenant Randall. It was good of you to come in. We think you can help us in a small matter connected with a friend of yours."

"Sure," Corsini said. He sat down on the edge of the chair. "Glad to help if I can. What's the

trouble, and who's the old friend?"

Randall nodded to the plain-clothes dick. "Bring him in, Joe." He turned to Corsini. "He says you gave him money two weeks ago. We want to check the accuracy of that statement." Corsini looked scared. The detective ushered a new Jocko Caldwell into the room. He'd had his fix and he was on top of the world.

When he saw Corsini, however, some of his high joy evaporated and he shook his head apologetically.

"I tried to keep you out of it, Paul," he said, his words tripping over each other in his haste to explain. "I honestly did. But they got it out of me. I'm terribly sorry—"

Corsini stood up. "Jocko!" Agitation was plain in his face and voice. "You told them!"

"Yeah, but it's not what you think, Paul, believe me. I just told them you gave me that hundred bucks a couple of week ago to—" Jocko was going to say "tide me over", but Corsini didn't let him finish.

"You swore you'd keep it quiet, damn you!" he said. His mild eyes blazed and his big fists clenched. He took a step toward Jocko, who backed away. "Is this what you give me for my hundred bucks? I should have known it. You've never lived up to a bargain in your life!" Corsini turned his head to Randall.

"What's the charge?" he said.

"Against Caldwell?" Randall asked cagily.

"No, against me." Corsini's voice was gloomy. "Robbery? Conspiracy?"

"Paul!" Jocko wailed. "Shut up! I didn't tell them anything except you gave me the dough."

Randall looked from one to the other.

"Well, well," he said, leaning back in his swivel chair. "I guess we'd better have a little talk, the three of us, eh?"

Corsini, realizing that in his anger he had made a fool of himself, sank back to a seated position looking chagrined. Jocko Caldwell looked frightened. Randall looked like a yellow-eyed cat that has just sighted an easily accessible canary.

"Now, then," he said softly, "what's all this about robbery and conspiracy? And about keeping a bargain? You gave Caldwell a hundred dollars two weeks ago?"

"Well, I—"

"Yes or no, Corsini."

"Yes."

"And for what? To buy heroin with?"

Corsini raised his head and looked in amazement at Jocko.

"Hell, no!" he said explosively.

"He's an addict," Randall murmured. "Has been for over a year."

"I told you he didn't know it," said Jocko.

"You poor bastard," Corsini said commiseratingly. "That explains a lot of things."

"I'm sorry, Paul," Jocko said. "But I didn't tell them anything except your name and about the dough."

Randall said, "Quiet! What did you give him the dough for, Corsini? You might as well tell me. I'll sweat it out of Jocko if you don't."

"Don't say a word, Paul," Jocko advised harshly. "They can sweat me till hell freezes and I'll never—" Then he remembered how easily Randall had obtained Corsini's name from him not fifteen minutes ago, and he lapsed into shamed silence.

"I'll tell you," Corsini said after a moment, wearily. "I'll tell you if you let Jocko alone. It was my idea. I was a real fool. And I'm old enough to know better. But I honestly thought I was acting for the best."

Oh, brother! Randall thought, how often have I heard that line!

"I've got a mother who has this heart trouble, see?" Corsini said, as though that massive *non sequitur* explained everything. He paused to collect his thoughts. "She had a bad coronary a year ago, and although she recovered pretty well from it, she's got serious heart damage. She's a kind of semi-invalid. But she won't admit it; you know what I mean? She owns this ladies' dress shop on Kelly Street. It's just a small place, but mother works like a dog every day in that shop, selling clothes, waiting on customers, standing on her feet for hours and like that.

"Doc Bitner, who took care of her with her heart attack, told her she should take it easy, very easy, if she doesn't want to kill herself. But she won't listen to him. She's working just as hard as ever in her shop. And she isn't so young any more, either."

"She's a stubborn woman," Jocko Caldwell said unexpectedly. "As independent as a hog on ice. She loves that dress shop."

"What do you know about it?" Randall asked.

"I told you. Paul is an old friend of mine. So is his mother. I used to spend more time at their house when I was a kid than I did at my own, I guess."

"You keep out of this," Randall said. "Let Corsini tell it."

"Okay, okay."

"I've begged her to retire from her shop," Corsini went on. "It hardly brings in enough money for her to live on, anyway. But being a widow, she likes to feel she's not a burden on anyone. I've told her I can take care of her perfectly well. I've got a good job and make plenty of dough for both of us. But no, she won't listen. She's going to kill herself, as Doc Bitner says." Corsini's tone was bitter.

Lieutenant Randall said politely, "This is all very interesting. But what the hell has it got to do with the money you gave Caldwell two weeks ago?"

Corsini said, flushing, "I gave Jocko the hundred bucks to rob my mother's dress shop." He ran a hand over his hair in embarrassment.

Randall stared at him.

"You're kidding," he said.

"No, I'm not. That's the truth. I'm fond of my mother, Lieutenant, and I don't want to see her kill herself. Can't you understand that?"

"Sure. You're so fond of her that you pay a junkhead to rob her." He paused. "Corsini, eh? I thought that name rang a bell. We've got a file on your mother's robbery. Dresses, coats and furs?"

Corsini nodded miserably. "Yeah. I knew the financial condition of the shop pretty well, because she talks over her sales and stock problems with me. And I knew she didn't have any of her stock insured. She can't afford it, any more than she can afford to hire a clerk to relieve her of some of the work. So I figured that if she was robbed of about five thousand dollars worth of her stock, she'd have to retire. Because the dress shop would be bankrupt, see?"

Lieutenant Randall's sleepy, sulphur-colored eyes regarded Corsini unblinkingly. The lieutenant had interviewed a great many criminals in his day. He prided himself on his ability to distinguish falsehood from truth in their statements. He was impatient with himself now, because he was morally certain that Corsini was telling the truth. And he found it difficult to maintain his usual cool objective attitude toward the first criminal in his long experience who had actually committed a crime with honorable intentions.

He probed a little deeper. "Five thousand dollars. Is that the exact amount of goods you told Caldwell to steal from your mother's shop?"

"Yes. I gave him a list from her inventory of items. Just enough to cause the business to fail. Not enough so she'd be completely ruined and in debt."

"And what have you done with the stolen goods?"

"Nothing. I've got them hidden in the coal cellar of the garage where I work."

Randall turned to Jocko. "You did the actual stealing, then?"

Jocko shrugged. "For a hundred bucks to buy horse, it was a small favor to do for a friend. And it's the only stealing I've ever done, Lieutenant," he added.

"How was it worked?"

"I just drove Paul's car over to his mother's shop Thursday a week ago about two in the morning, broke in the back door and picked out the stuff on Paul's list. Then I piled it into the car and drove it over to Paul's garage where he works, and he was waiting for me. That was it."

"Why didn't you do the job yourself?" Randall asked Corsini.

"I thought of it. And I tried to force myself. But I just couldn't seem to do such a thing to my own mother. You know how it is? If she ever found out it was me, the shock might finish her, with her bad heart and all."

"You've got a strange way of showing consideration for your mother," Randall said sourly. "You're in trouble, boys. Real trouble. Both of you."

He swiveled his desk chair around and stared for three minutes out of his dirty office window, letting Corsini and Caldwell sweat. The crazy fools, he thought. But he couldn't suppress an inward chuckle at what a real swinging defense attorney could do with this story. Instead of a well-earned stretch in the sneezer, the judge would more than probably award Corsini a medal for being such a dutiful son.

Finally he turned and called to his plainclothesman. "Bring me the file on the Corsini robbery, Joe. And go out to the Corsini Dress Shop on Kelly Street and ask Mrs. Corsini to come in. Tell her we've got something on her robbery. But tell her gently." He slanted a yellow look at Corsini. "She's got heart trouble, I understand."

Corsini and Caldwell sat staring at each other silently, but with no unfriendliness, while Lieutenant Randall glanced quickly through the thin file on Mrs. Corsini's dress shop robbery. At one point, Randall lifted his eyes from his reading and stared contemplatively at Corsini before going back to the report. When the quiet in the office was becoming almost insupportable to Corsini, his mother was ushered in by Joe.

She was a young-looking sixty-five, with pure white hair that almost looked premature over her good-tempered face. She was impeccably dressed in a light blue summer dress with a matching cashmere cardigan thrown around her shoulders.

Randall stood up politely when she entered the room; he smoothly covered up the dismayed gasp she gave upon noting her son's presence by saying genially, "Mrs. Corsini, we've made some progress in tracing the men responsible for your robbery last week and want to bring you up to date on it. Won't you sit down?"

Jocko Caldwell stood up and said, "Hey, Mrs. Corsini, sit here in my chair." He helped her into the chair, patted her arm, and when

she looked at him, shook his head slightly at her

"But Paul! And Jocko. What in the world are you doing here?" were her first words after she was settled.

"Mother, please take it easy, will you?" Corsini said in a low voice. "It's nothing very serious—that is, we don't want you to get excited. Will you promise to stay calm?"

"Certainly." She looked at Randall with a puzzled smile. "I'm calm. But for Heaven's sake, what's going on? You two boys look as guilty as you used to when I caught you stealing cookies from my jar when you were kids. Is something wrong, Paul?"

"Excuse me," Randall interjected. "Here is what we've discovered about your robbery, Mrs. Corsini." He proceeded to tell her as tactfully as possible that her own son had paid Jocko Caldwell to rob her dress shop.

As the story was unfolded, Mrs. Corsini's changing emotions were plainly visible on her handsome face. Mirrored there for Randall to observe were first, incredulity, then anger, then understanding, then tearful affection, and finally, unmistakable forgiveness for the miscreants.

At the end, she gazed pleadingly at Randall and said in a barely controlled voice, "They did it for my sake, Lieutenant. To make me retire, stubborn old woman that I am. Must Paul go to jail? And poor Jocko? It's not really a robbery, is it?"

"I'm sorry, but it's really a robbery, yes," Randall answered her. "The genuine illegal article."

"I should have listened to Paul and the doctor!" Mrs. Corsini wailed. "I should have given in and closed the shop! Look at what I've done! Paul, what a horrible mess. It's all my fault."

"Now, Mother," Paul soothed her, holding her hand. "Don't get upset. I was stupid, that's all. It's not your fault."

"Of course not," Jocko said. "It's my fault, if it's anyone's. If I hadn't been desperate for money, Paul could never have talked me into a dumb stunt like that!"

"Excuse me," the lieutenant interrupted patiently. "The thing's done, no matter whose fault it was. I want to ask Mrs. Corsini one question."

Abruptly she fell silent, a frown disfiguring her pleasant face. "Yes?"

"I'm interested in a little discrepancy," said Randall. "Your son has told me that his instructions to Caldwell were specific: to steal five thousand dollars worth of goods from your shop. Is that correct, Corsini?"

"That's right."

"And you stole only the items on that list that Corsini gave you?" Randall asked Jocko.

Jocko swallowed. "Y-yes, sir."

"Then how come," said Randall

with a sharp look at Mrs. Corsini, "your report to the police lists your loss as fifteen thousand dollars?" He tapped the file folder on his desk.

Corsini sat bolt upright in his chair. "Fifteen!" he said. "That's wrong! It wasn't fifteen thousand, Mother. It couldn't have been. Jocko only took five thousand worth of stuff. I got the values from your own records!"

"She reported fifteen thousand loss to us," Randall said quietly, watching her. "Didn't you, Mrs. Corsini?"

She put a hand over her eyes. "Yes."

"But, Mother—"

"Please." Randall waved young Corsini to silence. "You had insured your stock after all, hadn't you, Mrs. Corsini?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. And from the discrepancy in amounts, I take it you insured it for three times what it was worth?"

She dropped her head. "Yes."

"Mother!" Paul exclaimed, shocked. "You didn't!"

"Yes, I did, Paul. I was crazy. Crazy."

"That's fraud," Randall said. "That's a felony, Mrs. Corsini. Didn't you know that?"

She got out a small blue handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "Yes, I knew I was doing wrong. But I did need the money so badly. I did it for Paul and Cora."

"Mother!" Paul cried, making use again of his favorite expletive.

"What do you mean you needed the money?" Randall asked.

"The insurance money," Mrs. Corsini said, the words slightly muffled by the blue handkerchief. "And the true value of the stolen goods wasn't enough. I needed more."

"But you didn't know when you insured your stock for triple its value that you'd have a claim, did you?" Randall gave her a severe look, seeing the direction in which his inquiry pointed. "When did you take out this insurance?"

"Two weeks ago."

"Aha!" Randall pounced. "Now I get it. Your son, here, told you he was going to rob your store and told you to take out insurance on your stock, so you could collect triple from the insurance company. Isn't that it? It was collusion, wasn't it, Corsini?" He barked at Corsini, who was looking a little groggy.

"It certainly was not!" Corsini yelled. He forgot all about his injunction to his mother to take it easy. He was livid. "What the hell is this? Are we all being framed, or what? All I did was hire a guy to rob my mother!" Randall had a grin. "And all Jocko did was to steal five thousand dollars worth of clothes out of her shop. Collusion? You're nuts!"

Randall caught Jocko throwing a quick, uneasy, corner-of-the-eye

glance at Paul. He remembered the warning headshake Jocko had given Mrs. Corsini. He said, "Is that all you did, Jocko?"

Jocko was surly. "That's all."

"Are you sure? Didn't you go to Mrs. Corsini after Paul hired you to rob her, and tell her about it before you pulled the heist?"

Paul goggled at Jocko.

"You didn't!" he shouted, furious. "Damn it, Jocko!"

"Easy," Randall said. "Isn't that what happened, Jocko?"

"Mrs. Corsini has a bad heart," Jocko said defiantly. "The shock of a robbery at her shop might be too much for her, I thought. So I tipped her off beforehand, that's all. She's kind of a second mother to me, after all, for God's sake!"

"You rat!" Paul glared at Jocko. "You double-crossing rat!"

"Yeah, you rat," Randall said lazily. He said to Mrs. Corsini: "So when you knew you were going to be robbed, and of how much and for what reason and by whom, then you insured your stock for triple its value so you could collect big, eh?"

"Yes." Mrs. Corsini wouldn't meet her son's accusing gaze.

"And you had to report fifteen thousand as your loss to the police before you could claim that much from the insurance company to cover the loss. Right?"

She nodded, and gave a little sniffling sob into her handkerchief.

"Now," said Randall, leaning back in his chair and linking his hands behind his head comfortably, "you said you did it for Paul and Cora. Who's Cora?"

"Keep her out of this!" Paul warned his mother sharply. "You want to hook her up with a bunch of criminals like us?"

She ignored him. "Cora is the girl that Paul wants to marry, Lieutenant. She's very nice, too, although she doesn't like me very much, I'm afraid. She thinks I stand in the way of their marriage."

"How's that?" asked Randall, feeling more like a social service worker than a cop.

"Well, Cora knows I have a bad heart, of course. And she knows Paul has been trying to get me to retire from my dress shop and let him support me. And she knows that if I ever did it, I'd have to live with them because Paul can't support two establishments. So she won't marry him. She simply can't agree to have her mother-in-law share the same house with them, that's all. I don't blame her, either. I've said that right along. That's

one reason I've kept on working, hoping they'd get married."

"Mother!" Paul said in exasperation. "Cora likes you fine. You know she does."

"Not enough so she's willing to marry you and take a chance of having to live with me," his mother said tartly.

Randall shook his head.

"Mother-in-law trouble even before you're married," he said. "That's tough. But how would defrauding the insurance company solve that?"

Mrs. Corsini straightened her shoulders.

"I was desperate," she explained. "I wanted to do as Paul asked, and retire. But I want him to marry Cora and start living his own life even more. So I thought if I could get fifteen thousand dollars from the insurance company on top of what I could sell my store for, I'd have enough to retire and live in a place of my own for my remaining years. Then I wouldn't interfere with Paul and Cora at all. Don't you see? I was trying to become financially independent for their sake."

"You sure were," Randall grunted. "The hard way."

He was silent a moment, telling himself this couldn't be happening. He couldn't be uncovering three such nobly-motivated criminals in a single day. Yet Mrs. Corsini's story rang true to his finely attuned ear. And so, surprisingly, did Jocko Caldwell's concern for the old lady's health.

He said to Paul, "Where does Cora live?"

Paul said, "Oh, no you don't! You aren't going to get her in here, too, and saddle her with one of your crimes! Let her alone!"

Mrs. Corsini said, "She lives at Twelve-twelve Monroe Street."

Randall said to the plainclothesman, "Get her, Joe."

When he saw Cora, Randall found himself sympathizing more deeply than ever with young Corsini's predicament and with Mrs. Corsini's desire to get Paul safely married to this lovely creature. She was tall and blonde and built, and her eyes, when they rested upon Paul, held nothing but adoration.

If I had that on the string and couldn't land it, I'd probably go a bit haywire myself, thought Randall, watching Cora bend her shapely self in the middle to lean down and kiss Paul. He sighed.

"I understand you dislike your prospective mother-in-law," he began, opening the ball with gusto.

Cora bunched her fair brows in annoyance. "You just understand wrong, then. I respect and admire her a great deal. But what's she doing in this police station, may I ask? And what's Paul doing here? And for that matter, what am I doing here?"

She was a cool one. Randall found himself liking her style as well as her stacking. He put out a

palm, inviting her to sit, and proceeded to fill her in on the various crimes committed by her future family.

She listened without a word, but her face grew paler with each revelation, and her eyes went oftener and oftener to Paul, sitting hunched up in the chair beside her. Randall didn't like to see the panicky premonition of major catastrophe dawning in her eyes, but he couldn't do much about that.

He said at the end, "Is that true? That you refuse to marry Paul because circumstances might soon force Mrs. Corsini to become a financial burden on Paul? And she might have to live with you?"

"Yes, it's true!" Cora blazed. "And not because I don't like Mrs. Corsini, either! It's the principle of the thing. My mother always said any marriage was doomed that began with three people participating. And she ought to know. Her mother-in-law lived with her for the first six years of her marriage. And her marriage only lasted seven."

She paused for breath, mastering her indignation. "But is it true what you said—about Mrs. Corsini committing a crime to try to help Paul and me?"

Paul said, "Of course it's true, Cora. She's always wanted us to be on our own. I'm the one that insisted she quit work and live with us. You know that." His voice dropped to a mournful but musical bass. "And I've sure as hell loused us all up trying to work it out."

"Don't blame yourself, darling," Cora said protectively. "You thought you were acting for the best interests of your mother." She turned to Mrs. Corsini. "No matter what happens to you for that crime," she said soberly, "I want you to know, Mrs. Corsini, that I consider you a very kind, generous and courageous woman to try what you did for Paul and me. I'll never forget it." A tear ran down her smooth cheek. Randall watched it, fascinated.

He swung to his window and looked out at the blue sky through the dirty pane. And he made up his mind, painfully aware that he was acting more like a human being than a cop. He turned around and barked at Mrs. Corsini: "Are you going to prosecute your son for planning to rob your store? Are you going to prefer charges against Caldwell for the theft? You've got your pick of charges. Robbery, conspiracy, receiving stolen goods, almost anything fits except murder. It's up to you, of course." He schooled his voice to a careful contempt.

"No! No! I won't prosecute," Mrs. Corsini said, looking up with a spark of hope. "Of course not. The boys did it for me."

"Then I can't very well hold them," Randall said. "Although, Caldwell, you're still stuck with a narcotics possession charge." He

stretched. "Now, then, Mrs. Corsini. Have you received your settlement check from the insurance company yet?"

"No. I only filed my claim a day or two ago."

Randall pushed his telephone toward her.

"Call them up," he said, "and cancel that claim. Tell them the police have recovered your stolen goods intact. I'll confirm it. They'll probably be delighted to hear it. while you're about it, cancel the insurance policy itself. Get yourself out of their books entirely. They'll think that's funny, but insurance companies think everything is funny. After all, they got one big premium payment out of you. That's gravy."

Mrs. Corsini did as he directed. The insurance company's claims office was, as Randall predicted, delighted to cancel her claim, asking only for confirmation in writing.

She got a little argument about canceling her policy, but finally it was arranged.

When she hung up, Mrs. Corsini's eyes were shining like stars under her white hair, and she was only restrained from coming around Randall's desk and hugging him by the warning flash in his own peculiar eyes.

Paul was radiant. He put one arm around Cora and hugged her. The other he put around his mother.

Randall said to Cora, "It's none of my business, really, but did you mean what you just said about really liking your mother-in-law to be?"

"Certainly," she averred, her eyes shining.

"Then why not take the simple way out of your housing difficulty? It's only a suggestion, but it seems obvious. After you marry Paul, go to work for your mother-in-law in her shop. You be the clerk she can't afford to hire. Take some of the load off her. Then she'll be able to take it easier, but still have enough income to live in a place of her own, without bothering you and Paul."

Cora's eyes filled and her rare smile flashed out. "What a perfectly gorgeous idea! It would work, too, I bet! Don't you think so—Mother?" she said shyly.

"Mother" could only sob gently into her blue handkerchief and nod her head vigorously.

"So," Randall said, "that leaves you, Jocko."

He stared bleakly at Jocko Caldwell. "You're trying to kick the habit, you say."

Jocko nodded.

After pondering for a moment, Randall lifted his eyes to Paul Corsini. "Am I wrong, or do you figure you owe Jocko something for tempting him to commit a crime?"

Paul grinned. "I owe him so much I'll never be able to make it up to him."

"Maybe you will," Randall replied. "If I release Jocko in your custody, do you think your budget would run to the cost of buying Jocko a cure at the Stoneledge Clinic in Philadelphia?" He cleared his throat. "They're very good, I understand."

Jocko was on his feet, a dazed look on his face. He swallowed and tried to say something, but gave it up. Paul grabbed his arm. "Come on, sentimental slob," he said roughly. "You've got to pack. The Philadelphia plane's at four-thirty."

They left, uttering largely incoherent thanks to Lieutenant Randall.

When they were out in the street, Cora seized Paul's arm and hugged it. "Didn't I tell you?" she chortled happily. "Didn't I tell you it would be easy? Now Corsini's Dress Shop really has it made. And I can stop being a press agent and settle down as a shop clerk—if you'll marry me, Paul."

Paul grinned. "I'll marry you all right, provided you get the story in the papers the way you promised."

"I wrote up the release this morning," Cora said, "and sent it to every city editor in town. They'll print it as soon as I confirm it and give them the name of the police officer involved."

"You put in the name of the dress shop, I hope," said Mrs. Corsini anxiously.

"Of course. That's the whole point. I'll guarantee that when people read your story in the papers, your dress shop will be the most popular and profitable in the county. People just can't contain their sympathy for noble misguided souls like you three."

Cora giggled. "They'll come from miles around to buy dresses at your shop. And to see what the big insurance swindler looks like, of course."

"But are you quite sure," Jocko Caldwell asked, "that the papers will print it?"

"How could they resist? It's the human interest story of the year. And who's to know it was staged? Just look at the cast: honest young mechanic, dope fiend who wants to be cured, doting hard-working mother with heart trouble, all turning to crime and double-crossing each other like mad, purely in the name of Love! It can't miss. It's a cinch for the front page."

They stopped at a corner drug store while Cora went in to telephone the story into all the newspapers.

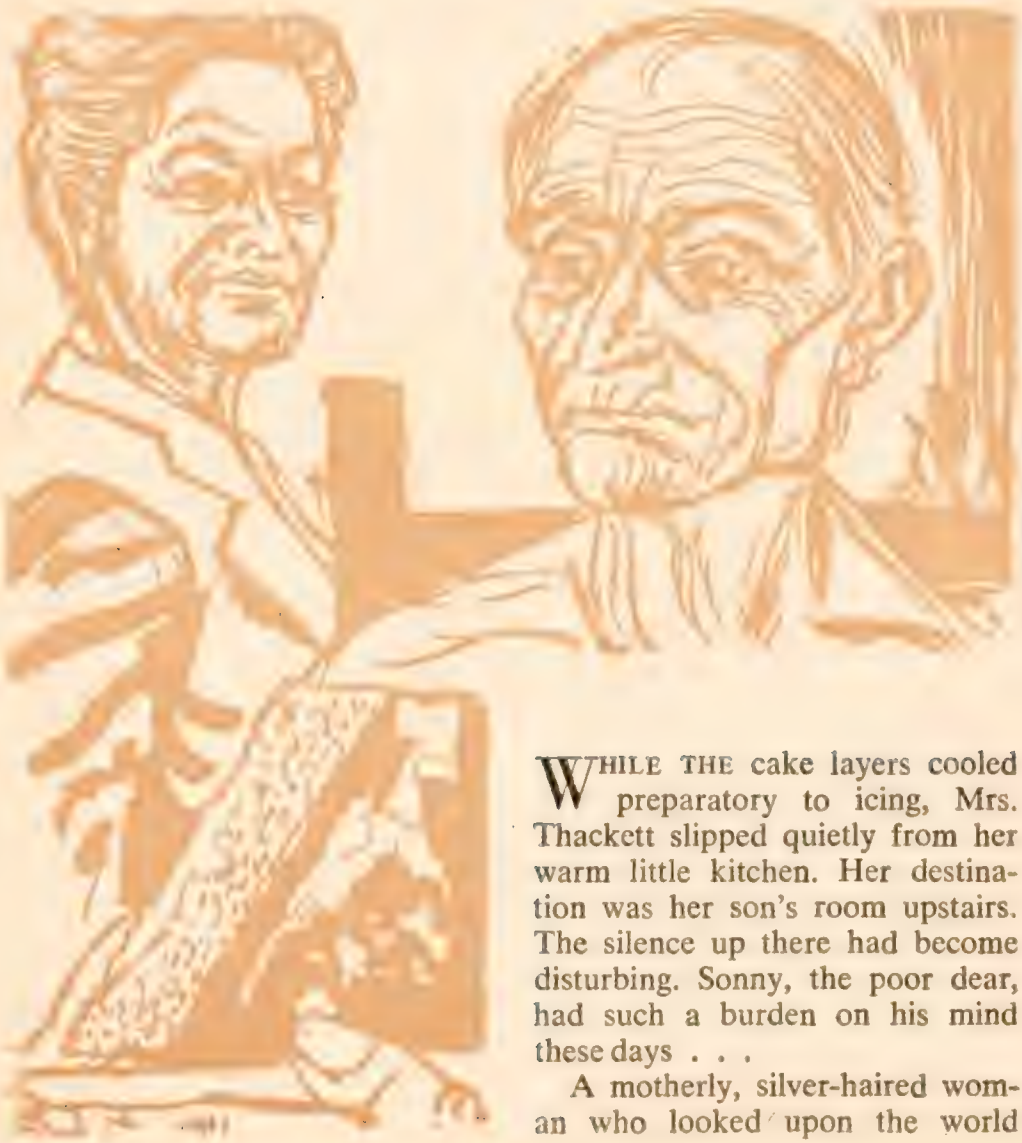
Jocko said doubtfully, "Lieutenant Randall isn't going to like all this publicity."

"Don't worry about him," Paul Corsini said comfortably. "The publicity will do him more good than anyone. The city will be so proud it has an understanding, honest cop on the force that Randall could probably run for mayor!"

HOME COOKED CAKE

by TALMAGE POWELL

Nothing stood between motherly Mrs. Thackett and safety but a bit of cake—and just a bit of poison.



WHILE THE cake layers cooled preparatory to icing, Mrs. Thackett slipped quietly from her warm little kitchen. Her destination was her son's room upstairs. The silence up there had become disturbing. Sonny, the poor dear, had such a burden on his mind these days . . .

A motherly, silver-haired woman who looked upon the world

with the vacant blue eyes of a pink-cheeked doll, Mrs. Thackett entered the artificial gloom of the living room. She always kept the room darkened so the sun wouldn't fade her cherished old furnishings. She crossed to the stairway and started up the worn runner, listening intently for some sound.

Although she liked her house to be quiet and orderly, Mrs. Thackett right now almost wished that Sonny would start playing one of those horrid records. Anything would do better than this lassitude, this paralysis of fear that had come over him.

She reached the door of his room and peeked in. He was lying on his side, his back toward her, staring out the window. He was such a wonderful boy with his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and thick black hair.

She moved toward his bed, her throat thick with affection. She wasn't going to scold him for lying fully clothed on the counterpane. Instead, she eased to a sitting position on the edge of the bed and touched his shoulder. She had to swallow against the choked-up sensation before she trusted herself to speak.

"Sonny."

"Yes, Mother."

"What would you like for lunch today?"

"It doesn't matter."

Mrs. Thackett bit her lip. During his eighteen years, she had always been able to brighten Sonny's spirits with the enticement of food. Sonny did enjoy eating. She'd known, from the moment she'd first held him as a baby, that he was going to have a delicate stomach which would require her own special attention.

"Darling," she chided gently, "you know you have to eat to keep your strength up."

The mattress rustled beneath the slow turning of his hundred-seventy pound bulk. Under bushy dark brows, his eyes regarded her. A strange light lived in his eyes briefly, causing her to feel a tremor of alarm.

"Strength for what, Mother?"

"Sonny, you mustn't talk like that. The thing that happened—it wasn't your fault!"

He got up slowly, walked to the window, stared through it blankly. "Wasn't it, Mother? Three nights ago an old man was living. Today he's dead. It was my car that hit him. My car that ran away."

"But it was his own doing, Sonny! He had no business being in a shoddy tavern at such an hour—drinking so much that he couldn't see on-coming headlights when he walked between two parked cars. It just happened to be you who was coming along the street when he started across. He was there so suddenly you had no chance to stop. But you didn't arrange it, Sonny! Just anybody might have hit him."

"But just anybody didn't, Mother."

She stood up, moved around the end of the bed, grasped his hand, and pressed it to her cheek. "That's the whole point, Sonny. If just anybody had done it. I wouldn't care. He was a senile, drunken old man who had used up his years. A dirty old bum of no importance until he did this dreadful thing to you!"

"Mother, he didn't—"

"Oh, yes," she said emphatically. "You were going along minding your own business. You would have avoided him if he'd given you any chance. You—" She grabbed the corded muscles of his bicep as inspiration came to her. "You don't blame your car for what happened, do you, Sonny?"

"Of course not, Mother. But—"

"Well, there!" she said, a sudden touch of radiance in her firm-fleshed little face. "You see? You had no more controlled over what happened than the car itself."

"But I ran away, Mother."

"It would have made no difference to him if you'd stayed. You know what the newspapers said the next day."

He disengaged himself from her clutch, leaned his hands on the window sill, and looked at the back yard below. "I wish it hadn't happened. How I wish it!" he said, the first sound of a sob in his voice.

"Of course you do, dear. But a passing motorist saw the old man, called an ambulance. The old man was taken to a hospital. Could you have done more? The papers said that he might have survived if he had not been so saturated with alcohol."

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I just don't know."

"In a way he killed himself, Sonny, putting all the cheap liquor in his system."

"You've told me that, but I can't duck the fact that it was my car." He jerked his face around. "I was at the wheel."

"Please, darling," she patted his cheek. "Try to forget . . ."

"Forget? Forget the way I felt that night when I ran for home?"

"A man's home is his sanctuary, Sonny. And I've made a home for you, haven't I? From the day your father died, haven't I always been here when you needed me? That night, when you poured it out to me, all that had happened, didn't I go out and examine your car? I washed the blood from the bumper so you'd be safe, didn't I?"

Looking at her, a change began to take place in his eyes. With relief, Mrs. Thackett instinctively recognized his return to his norm. He was looking to her for help, depending on her.

"I'm—afraid, Mother."

"Everything will be all right, Sonny. Believe me."

"I'd been lying here, thinking about going to the police."

Quick alarm dried out her throat. "If you destroyed yourself,

Sonny, what would I have left? I've given you more than money. I've given you devotion, my very life."

She reached up and wiped the fine beads of sweat from his forehead. "You just wait and see, Sonny. Things will work out."

"Including that other old man?" he said. "That old Mr. Barlow?"

"You leave Mr. Barlow to me."

"If we start off with him, Mother, we'll never be rid of him. He isn't the kind to take payment once and keep his mouth shut for keeps."

"I know, Sonny," Mrs. Thackett said quietly. "But you're not to worry about Mr. Barlow or anything else. Mother will take care of you."

He sank slowly to the bed, stretched himself prone, drew his knees up like a child at rest, and closed his eyes.

She patted his shoulder fondly, crossed the room, and closed the door gently behind herself.

She returned to her kitchen, thinking of Mr. Barlow. A fat, sloppy old man, he occupied the house across the street. Like its owner, the house was the eyesore of the neighborhood. Mr. Barlow had gone through the comfortable nestegg he'd inherited from his wife. The house and the pittance he received from Social Security at present constituted the total of his resources. He was too lazy to work, Mrs. Thackett knew, preferring to spend his time spying on and gossiping about his neighbors.

The morning after Sonny's unavoidable accident, Mrs. Thackett had been in her kitchen when Mr. Barlow's face had appeared at the small window over the sink.

"Good morning, Mrs. Thackett." His face, she'd thought for the thousandth time, was like a dirty bread pudding with a pulpy apricot stuck in for a nose.

"How do you do, Mr. Barlow?" she'd said distantly.

"I do fine," he'd said. His face had left the window. Seconds later, he'd walked through the rear door into the kitchen.

"I don't believe I invited you in, Mr. Barlow."

"I won't hold the oversight against you," he'd said. A secretive smile on his face, he'd looked at her in such a way as to cause her hands to feel cold and clammy in the dishwater.

"Just what was it you wanted?"

"Well, now—" He'd seated himself comfortably at the small kitchen table—"I've been thinking. You own a real fine drugstore, Mrs. Thackett. I understand that when your husband died you were smart. You hired a first-rate manager for the store, paid him well. The result is that the business is bigger and better than ever."

"I don't believe I follow you, Mr. Barlow. What are you driving at?"

He'd drummed on the table with

his fingertips, a greedy flame coming to his eyes. "Maybe you can tell me what kind of medicine I should take, Mrs. Thackett. I haven't been too well."

"Medicine?"

"Man my age—well, you know. We have the problem of night rising now and then."

"Mr. Barlow, I really just don't see—"

He'd held up his hand, cutting her off. "Late last night, Mrs. Thackett, I was forced from my bed by the call of cruel nature."

"I suggest you see a urologist, Mr. Barlow."

"I haven't had the money for such necessities, Mrs. Thackett—up to now."

Very slowly, she had withdrawn her hands from the dishwater. "Up to now, Mr. Barlow?"

"You see," he'd said, "due to the warmth of the night, my upstairs bathroom window was open. At the late hour, everything was very quiet—until a car came into the neighborhood with maniacal fury. It skidded at the street corner with a screaming of tires. It skidded a second time when it turned into your driveway. And a third time when it slammed to a stop.

"I turned off the light, Mrs. Thackett, the better to see outside. Sonny got out of the car, as if the devil himself were a passenger. He—Sonny, I mean, not the devil, naturally—literally jetted inside your house. He moved so quickly, he forgot to turn off the headlights or close the car door.

"The strangeness of it all made me wonder if some sort of trouble had arisen in which I could offer neighborly help. So I continued to watch."

"Naturally," Mrs. Thackett had said through lips that felt like refrigerated dough.

"I saw lights go on in your house," Mr. Barlow had said with a wet smile. "Several minutes passed, while Sonny's car remained in the driveway, headlights burning, the door standing open. I assumed you and Sonny were having an earnest discussion.

"Later, Mrs. Thackett, I saw you come from your house. You used the rear door. You were carrying a pail in your hand. You were clearly visible in the headlights.

"With the pail in your hand, you came to the side of the car, turned off the headlights, closed the door. Returning to the front of the car, you dropped out of sight. You were there for a considerable time. Then you got in the car, drove it into the garage, and returned to the house.

"Finally, when your house was again dark and all was quiet, I decided a breath of air and a little exercise would help me sleep."

"So you strolled over," she'd murmured thinly.

Still smiling, Mr. Barlow had shrugged. "I saw the wet place in the driveway where you'd washed

the bumper of the car, Mrs. Thackett. This morning, I also saw a newspaper. The direction from which Sonny came, the time when the old man was killed by a hit-run driver, his obvious mental state when Sonny came home, the washing of the front of the car—well, you can see the conclusion a person might jump to, Mrs. Thackett."

"Are you accusing Sonny of—"

"Now, now, Mrs. Thackett, I'm too thoughtful a neighbor and too kind a man to make quick accusations. I'd be the last person—besides yourself—to want to see a fine young man like Sonny in trouble. I'm merely pointing out the conclusion the police would surely reach if they received an informative anonymous phone call.

"Also, I wonder what sort of admissions Sonny would make under the relentless pressure of police interrogation. I fear that Sonny wouldn't bear up long."

"What is it you want, Mr. Barlow?"

"Just to help Sonny, and you, Mrs. Thackett. After all, you're a widow with that very large drugstore. From time to time you might find the need to drop over and consult me on a business problem. As a thoughtful neighbor, I'd always be available."

"For a fee," she'd said.

He'd risen slowly. "Let's merely say that neighborly tokens of gratitude would always be appreciated." He'd moved to the doorway. "I won't press you on the instant, Mrs. Thackett. I know what a shock you've been through. Take a bit of time to think it over."

"How much time, Mr. Barlow?" she asked.

"Until tomorrow. Say, tomorrow at noon."

He'd left with the maddening smile still on his face. So sure of himself. So pleased. So certain that he'd pointed a weapon at the spot where it would hurt most, at the very core of her life.

He'd misjudged her in one respect only. The plump, motherly outer woman was nothing like the inner woman. With hardly a quiver of emotion, the inner woman had decided to silence Mr. Barlow forever. She had seen clearly there was no other way.

The mere prospect of trusting Sonny's safety to such a low thing was unthinkable. Each day she would die a thousand deaths, not knowing when a slip of Mr. Barlow's tongue, a drunken boast, would destroy Sonny.

From this moment, until the moment when Mr. Barlow's silence was insured, neither she nor Sonny could call their souls their own. A future under Mr. Barlow's shadow was too grim to contemplate.

Mr. Barlow had barely got out of the kitchen when Sonny had rushed in.

"Mother, I overheard—what'll we do?"

"Do?" she had said. "We'll have

a cup of warm tea. Then you must try to get some rest."

So much for the previous day, she thought now. She tested the cake layers to see if they were cool enough for icing.

She glanced at the wall clock as she slid the yellow layers from the baking pans. Almost noon. In his sordid house, perhaps Mr. Barlow, too, was glancing at the clock. She certainly didn't intend to keep him waiting.

She had already set out most of the ingredients for the icing. Into a mixing bowl she put butter, creamed in confectioner's sugar, added a dash of vanilla, and began working in cocoa.

The final ingredient nestled in the pocket of her apron, a gram of colorless crystals in a small vial.

As she stirred the icing, working it with a heavy wooden mixing spoon, she mused on Mr. Barlow's visit and its aftermath. The problem of disposing of him had kept her sleepless for a time last night. And then the inspiration had seemed to come from the darkness itself. If Mr. Barlow had a weapon, she also was well armed.

She had an entire drugstore at her disposal.

Without hesitation, she had got out of bed, dressed silently without turning on a light, and slipped from the house.

Alone in the prescription department of the silent, deserted store, she had first consulted a

pharmacopoeia to broaden quickly her already considerable knowledge of drugs.

When she left the drugstore a short time later, making sure the door was relocked securely, the vial of crystals had been in her handbag. Odorless, tasteless, enough to kill half a company of Marines—

As she uncapped the vial and let the crystals spill into the icing, she made a mental note to Mr. Barlow. It will be mercifully quick, Mr. Barlow. I shan't submit you to the cruelty of suffering long.

She watched the mixing spoon wrap the crystals in the creamy, chocolate mixture. She stirred busily, until she was certain the crystals had dissolved. Then, without waste of motion, she smeared the bottom layer of the cake, added the top, and used the back of the spoon to spread the icing in appetizing swirls.

As she slid the cake onto its plate and shielded it with the silver cover, she had one eye on the clock. Stripping off her apron, she picked up the cake and went quickly outside.

Before crossing the street, her eyes cut back and forth for a quick survey. Luck was with her. At this hour, the yards and sidewalks were practically deserted as housewives prepared lunch.

She hurried across the street and along Mr. Barlow's weed-bordered front walk. She knocked, and he opened the door immediately.

"How are you today, Mrs. Thackett?" he said with that fawning smile.

"Quite well, Mr. Barlow."

"Fine," he said. "I'm very glad to hear it."

She was inside now. The house was gloomy, cluttered. A pigsty, she thought.

"What have we here, Mrs. Thackett?" Mr. Barlow was moving from the front door, standing before her.

"I happened to make a cake, Mr. Barlow, and it occurred to me that you might like a slice of it. I hope you like chocolate.". .

"My favorite."

"Most men like it," she said. "I suppose the neighborhood has been a bit callous, Mr. Barlow. None of us ever reminding ourselves that a man living alone has practically no chance of tasting a home-made cake."

"Real neighborly of you, Mrs. Thackett. Does it mean you've thought kindly of our little talk of yesterday?"

"How else could I think of it, Mr. Barlow? We have a far closer bond than most neighbors now, don't we?"

His teeth were yellowed and broken. He could hardly hold pleased laughter inside of himself. For a second, Mrs. Thackett thought he was on the point of dancing a jig.

"Mr. Barlow, why don't we have a spot of tea and sample my cake while we discuss our little arrangement?"

"Excellent idea! Excellent!" He ushered her through the smelly house into the kitchen and scurried to the stove to put water on to boil.

Mrs. Thackett cleared a place in the middle of the kitchen table, set the cake down, and removed the cover.

Getting tea, cups, spoons, and sugar from the cabinet, Mr. Barlow said, "As to the amount of money, Mrs. Thackett—"

"Oh, shush, now, Mr. Barlow. Let's leave crudities to others. I'm quite sure we can reach agreement right here at your kitchen table."

She went to the dirty sink, rinsed a couple of small dishes for the cake.

She cut two generous wedges and placed them on the dishes.

Preparing tea, Mr. Barlow couldn't control the gloating and greed that came to his eyes. "You sure have a civilized way of doing business, Mrs. Thackett."

"Why not? Things should always be done as pleasantly as possible when things must be done."

"Excellent motto, Mrs. Thackett."

They sat down. Mr. Barlow had a brief moment of hesitation. He looked from the cake to her face. "Which piece is mine, Mrs. Thackett?"

"Either," she said. "Choose the one you like."

Mr. Barlow slid a wedge of cake toward himself. Again, he hesitated.

Mrs. Thackett picked up a slightly scaly fork and dug heartily into her piece of cake. Her gesture was careless, in appearance. But she made sure that her quick, casual motions dug out a large chunk of the cake itself, leaving the icing.

When Mrs. Thackett stuffed her mouth, Mr. Barlow attacked the cake with a will. "Delicious. Haven't tasted a real home cooked cake in a long, long time—"

Mrs. Thackett's heart was suddenly beating so rapidly that she felt faint.

"I was sure you'd like it, Mr. Barlow," she said quietly.

"Cut me another piece," he suggested, "and we'll bring up the subject of business."

Her whole body felt as if it were covered with prickly heat. She cut, placed the fresh wedge of cake on his dish, passed it to him.

"I'm not really a wealthy woman, Mr. Barlow."

"I know. But you're real well fixed."

"I won't be pushed too far, Mr. Barlow."

"Mrs. Thackett, I'm a reasonable, honorable man."

"Are you, Mr. Barlow?"

"A moderately monthly payment will suit me fine. While Sonny completes his education and the two of you enjoy a long, long future."

"Yes, I'm very jealous of the future, Mr. Barlow."

Gulping down cake, he eyed her speculatively. "How about we start by discussing a monthly figure of maybe—" He clutched the edge of the table. His fork clattered to the floor.

"What is it, Mr. Barlow?"

He looked at her with bulging eyes. He tried to get to his feet. His chair crashed over backward. He reeled toward the door, his hands clutching, grabbing, clawing at his stomach.

Halfway to the door, his body snapping double in agony, he pitched forward, striking his forehead first. He twisted and writhed like a fat caterpillar being tortured with lighted matches.

Then he was relaxed in death.

Resolutely, Mrs. Thackett tore her gaze from her victim and strengthened herself with the thought that the poison had left him with every indication of having suffered death from apoplexy. There was no person and no known circumstance to suggest an autopsy. Any doctor would fill out

the death certificate as a routine measure.

But there remained the big, final hurdle. The sanctuary of her own home suddenly seemed distant, unreal.

Keeping a tight rein on her thoughts, she washed the tea and cake dishes, searched the table and floor for fallen crumbs, covered the remainder of the cake, and tucked it under her arm.

Don't forget fingerprints, she reminded herself. She slipped the small handkerchief from the pocket of her dress. She wiped each item she'd touched in the kitchen, approached the front door, and used the handkerchief to clean and turn the knob.

She took her first look at the street with the door open about two inches. She saw no one. She opened the door wide enough to slip out.

An almost hysterical feeling of gladness swept through her as she saw the opportunity to leave undetected. No one yet in the yards or on the sidewalks.

She closed the front door, wiped the knob, and darted across the street. Along her own driveway.

At the rear corner of her house, she paused a moment to gasp a happy breath. It was over and done. Nothing remained now but to dissolve the remainder of the cake in water and flush it down a drain.

With a smile on her motherly face, Mrs. Thackett opened the door and stepped into her own kitchen. Abruptly, she was standing in a total paralysis.

Then the cake tin smashed to the floor. Mrs. Thackett opened her mouth, and a neighbor three blocks away heard the scream.

Sonny was sprawled almost at her feet. The icing bowl was no longer beside the sink. It was on the table and looked almost as if it had been washed.

The wooden mixing spoon was on the floor near a leg of the table.

And on Sonny's lips were dark brown smears, put there when Sonny had scraped the bowl and licked the spoon.

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The Wrong Man

by DAN ROSS

He had seen the face of Murder—
and signed his own death warrent!

MEI WONG, the elderly proprietor of the Bombay Art and Curio company, found himself locked in the shadowed interior of the small closet as loud, excited voices came from the paneled study outside. First, there had been the subdued murmur of two men quarreling. Then abruptly there was a sharp moan and the soft thud of a body falling on the the narrow metal vent slits of the heavily-carpeted floor. Through the narrow metal vent slits of the closet door the stout old art dealer managed a partial view of the big room.

Only an occasional flashing glimpse of the back of one of the men was visible to him.

Vainly Mei Wong twisted at the handle of the closet door but had no success in opening it. Frustrated, he pressed his broad face close to the vent to watch the man he'd just seen hurriedly cross the room and open the french doors that led to the garden.

Mei Wong was quickly aware of the intent of the fleeing man. Whatever he had just done here in the paneled study, he would make it seem the work of an intruder, someone who had entered the mansion to plunder—and had been forced to strike a blow. Muffled footsteps indicated the man was surveying the body on the floor. And then, purely through chance, Mei Wong's eyes fell on the far wall, where a mirror with an ancient carved frame happened to be hanging within his obstructed view. For just a moment the old

Featuring

MR. MEI WONG

art dealer saw the face of the man about to flee.

It was the narrow, cruel face of Martin Drake, nephew of Mei Wong's host, Henry Manson. Then Martin Drake moved, and the image vanished from the mirror. Completely shocked and enraged, Mei Wong took the door handle in a plump hand with renewed energy, at the same time he hurling his whole bulk against the door. Finally it opened.

His broad, Buddha-like countenance was completely expressionless as he gazed at the body of Henry Manson, sprawled on the carpet by his desk. The emeralds Mei Wong had been appraising were gone. And a jewelled dagger which Manson said had belonged to a prince of Nepal was plunged to its hilt in its owner's back.

The immaculately white-clad Mei Wong did not have to kneel by the body to know the millionaire was dead. He regretted not having been able to stop the crime, but it had all happened with stunning rapidity. Now there was nothing to do but report what he had seen, and place the murder in the hands of his friend Inspector Bannerjee, the black-bearded head of the great Indian city's homicide division. At least this time there could be no doubt as to the identity of the killer.

Mei Wong had come to the study at Henry Manson's invitation shortly after dinner. The distinguished, white-haired art collector had proudly displayed a new lot of emeralds purchased from a dealer in Ceylon. Now he wanted Mei Wong's appraisal of them.

"Not a bad lot, eh, Wong?" the man behind the desk smiled up at him.

Mei Wong lifted one of the largest of the emeralds and studied it.

"These are high quality stones," he agreed. "It would seem you have done well."

They talked for several minutes about the good points of the various gems. Then there had been the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Henry Manson's face had taken on a look of annoyance. Quickly he gathered up the stones and replaced them in a black chamois bag, which he put to one side of the broad mahogany desk.

"One of my nephews," he grumbled. "I have to talk to him about a rather unpleasant matter. Swindled quite a sum from one of my firms of which he's treasurer." He waved toward the closet door. "It might avoid embarrassment if you left that way. It's actually not a closet but an ante-room with a door on the other side leading to the rear hall."

Mei Wong nodded. With some haste he moved to the door and stepped inside. He heard the closet door click after him and in the narrow slit of light provided by the vent groped his way to the other

door, only to find it locked. He was caught in the closet and could only wait until the interview between Henry Manson and his nephew had come to an end. Then he could knock and advise the millionaire that he was trapped.

The old art dealer had remained very quiet and wondered which of the two young men whom he'd met at dinner it would be. Both of the nephews were employed by their uncle and they were twins. Although not identical they resembled each other to a great degree in their facial characteristics. The great difference between them was that Martin Drake was tall and thin with a supercilious air while Charles Drake was shorter and plump with a jovial disposition. Direct opposites in temperament, as so often was the case with brothers, even twin brothers.

Henry Manson was quite alone in the world aside from them and his adopted daughter June. She was the child of a friend, long dead, half white, half Indian, lovely with creamy, soft coffee skin and wide blue eyes. She had been educated in the best English schools and colleges and showed it in the way she graced the dinner table.

"I think that exquisite Ming bowl you found in Hong Kong is the most lovely thing that ever came into this house," she said with a smile for Mei Wong.

The old art dealer returned her

smile across the splendor of white cloth, rare china and gourmet food to say: "I will agree if we do not include you."

"Bravo!" Charles Drake, the stout nephew said with a laugh, "I call that gallant and well said. None of Uncle Henry's art items match June's living beauty."

The girl at his side blushed and studied her plate. Martin Drake, the tall thin nephew, who had seemed ill at ease throughout the meal, scowled. From the head of the table Henry Manson nodded approvingly.

"I would not trade any one of them for June," he said.

"Really, father!" The lovely June admonished him. "You're making me feel like something on which Mr. Wong will put a price tag."

"Aside from the fact I never use price tags," Mei Wong said, "I would not dare to be so bold in your case."

It was Martin Drake who changed the tone of the conversation.

"Do you travel far for your treasures, Mr. Wong?" he asked, showing in his manner he resented the previous discussion.

"I have ventured to Japan and Egypt," Mei Wong said. "My chief area of activity lies in the section of the world between those two points."

"But you have been to Europe and America?" Martin Drake continued to question him.

Mei Wong nodded. "To Europe many times. America only twice."

The discussion moved on to other things and the old art dealer was impressed by the wide knowledge of the girl sitting opposite him. He knew June would inherit the bulk of her doting foster-parent's huge fortune. Henry Manson had told him privately both of his nephews had paid the girl court and he hoped that she might fall in love with one of them. Mei Wong wondered if this had happened.

Later at dinner Martin Drake had turned to the lovely June and said: "If we are going to make the concert in time we'd better plan to leave at eight."

She had nodded, anticipation in her blue eyes.

"I'll be ready," she'd promised.

Now Mei Wong stared at the murdered Henry Manson and wondered how Martin Drake had gotten rid of the girl and returned to commit his crime. For he was sure it was Martin's lean, cruel face he'd seen in that mirror across the room. With a deep sigh he moved to the door. Nothing must be touched until the police arrived. He would call his friend Inspector Bannerjee at once and inform him of the violent turn of events.

A few minutes later he made his way to the living room downstairs, where he found the jovial Charles Drake seated by the wireless set listening to the lilting music of a jazz band. When the stout young man saw him he jumped up and went over and turned the set off. Then he advanced to meet Mei Wong with a smile.

"An unexpected pleasure, Mr. Wong," he said. And with a gesture: "Won't you sit down?"

Mei Wong looked at him solemnly.

"I regret being the bearer of bad tidings," he said. "Your uncle has been murdered."

Charles Drake seemed not to understand for a moment, then shock crossed his fat face. He said in a low voice: "I can't believe it."

"I have just come from his upstairs study," Mei Wong said. "I was in the ante-room off it when it happened. It took place quickly and I was temporarily trapped inside. But I did manage to see who did it."

Charles Drake was already heading for the stairs. Mei Wong followed at a slower rate. When he joined the stout young man in Henry Manson's study he found him standing by the body. He

raised his eyes to meet the art dealer's.

"Downstairs, just now," he said. "You told me you knew who did this awful thing."

"That is correct," Mei Wong said with some hesitation. But it must be faced. He said: "It was your brother Martin." He pointed to the mirror. "I saw his face plainly in that."

Charles Drake's stout face took on a curious expression. "But Martin went to a concert with June! It must have been some stranger who broke in!"

Mei Wong said with a shrug, "I saw your brother and so I must tell the police."

There was no reply from the stout man and Mei Wong turned away and for no particular reason strolled over to the mirror in which he'd seen the murderer's face. He paused before it and studied his own reflection. And he found himself startled. The mirror was a flawed one for all its ornate antique frame, and it transformed his normally broad face to one that was lean and drawn out. It was at that moment he knew he had made an error in naming the killer.

His certainty was reinforced when he heard Charles Drake speak quietly from behind him: "You are right, Mr. Wong. You named the wrong brother."

Mei Wong found himself staring into the muzzle of a small, vicious-looking gun.

"Too bad, Mr. Wong," the stout man said. "You've spoiled my plan of blaming my uncle's murder on an intruder, unless of course I can include you as a second victim." He paused to sigh. "Yes, I'm afraid that is the way it has to be."

Mei Wong stood before him, quietly waiting for the inevitable moment when Charles Drake would pull the trigger.

Then from the french doors came the sound of another intruder—this time a genuine one in the person of Inspector Bannerjee. The bearded man also had a gun in his hand.

"You will be wise to drop that," he said. "I suggest you surrender yourself."

As a second police officer joined the inspector, Charles Drake went white and let the gun slip from his hands to the carpet. Inspector Bannerjee nodded to his assistant to take the killer into custody, while he went over to Mei Wong.

"All right?" he asked him.

Mei Wong nodded. "For a moment I feared you might not get here soon enough."

"We wasted no time after your call," the Inspector said. "It's not often you present us with the murderer along with his victim."

Mei Wong's broad face showed resignation.

"Had you come ten minutes earlier," he admitted, "I'm afraid I would have blamed the wrong man."

AN OUTSTANDING SUSPENSE NOVELET

"Those Who Kill"

Somewhere in the Paris night they must find Roger Temple's last pickup—or an innocent man would die at dawn!

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

He was wearing a scowl as he strode down the Champs Elysées. You could see it coming for nearly half a block away. It was all out of tune with everything else around it. Behind him the Arc de Triomphe was a cardboard cut-out against a pip of a sunset, and ahead of him all the fountains of the Place de la Concorde were playing against their floodlights like liquid diamonds, and people were meeting each other at the little sidewalk tables all along the line. The air wasn't just air, it was ethereal champagne. And yet he kept pushing that black look along in front of him, spoiling the whole lovely Paris evening for himself.

He was just under six feet and still under thirty; he was well dressed and as American as corn flakes. Anyone glancing at him as he went by would have been entitled to the opinion that he should have straightened out his face, until he really had something to scowl about, at least.

There was a girl standing there waiting to get across to the other side. Or maybe that was giving her the benefit of the doubt. He didn't even look twice at her, just made sure her figure ended in a skirt and

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there were no crutches under her arms. His long legs had already swept him a yard past her, but he wheeled around, so suddenly that she edged back cautiously. He still had on that burnt face. He touched his hat perfunctorily and blurted, "You doing anything?"

"N-no. What do you mean?" she faltered, taken back.

"Well, do you want to come to a show?" he asked. He shoved his hand in his coat and brought out a wallet gorged with money. He dug a pair of pasteboards out of one of the compartments. "I've got two perfectly good tickets here for the Casino—Row Double-A."

"Are you serious? Do you really mean it?" she asked uncertainly.

"What do they look like—street car transfers?" He was as sore as ever; wasn't even looking at her, was just holding the two tickets pronged out toward her, and looking resentfully back over her shoulder in the direction from which he'd just come.

She'd read the price on them upside down.

"Well, sure," she said with characteristic French thrift. "They cost good money. If you want me to go to a show—all right, I'll go to a show. It doesn't begin for nearly another three hours yet, though. Do you want me to come along with you now, or shall I meet you in the foyer at eight-thirty?"

He'd put the wallet, and the tickets with it, back in his inside pocket again.

"I'm not waiting around for anybody," he said shortly. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Come on. We'll kill time that way."

Then just as she took a step forward to fall in line with him, he whirled on her again. "Let's get this straight before we start. It's not a date; it's not a pickup. It's just using up these two tickets I've got. When the show's out at eleven —" He tipped his hat meaningfully.

"I didn't say anything," she murmured.

They continued in the direction he'd been heading when he first stopped short, but at a more casual gait now; she couldn't have kept up with his former one.

"Did somebody turn you down?" she asked shrewdly.

"No questions, no answers."

She shrugged. "Is it all right if I talk, or would you rather not have me do that either?"

"Yes, you can talk. Only keep it impersonal, neutral."

They skirted the Concorde, soft spray blowing in their faces from the flood-lighted fountains, proceeded along the rue Rivoli as far as the rue Royale, then turned down that. They stopped at a restaurant off the Place de l'Opera.

"This do?" he asked indifferently.

"It's a lot better than I would have selected on my own," she said.

They went in, had to wait a couple of minutes for a table, finally got one. It was fixed price, so she didn't have to worry about ordering too steeply.

The meal wasn't taken in silence. She chatted amiably all the way through it, by way of showing she appreciated his hospitality, but she obeyed his conditions to the letter. Nothing personal, just general topics. The weather, politics, this kind of fish was very good but you had to watch out for bones.

He hardly opened his mouth from beginning to end. Probably didn't hear a word she was saying, judging by the look on his face. It had relaxed a little by now, from what it was in the beginning, but still had a long way to go to be completely cheerful.

"Shall we start?" he said finally, after they'd been finished and sitting a while.

"We'll have time to walk it, and take our time," she said.

But outside on the street he threw up his arm for a cab.

"I don't mind walking, I do quite a lot—" she started to say, then stopped with a little chuckle. That went over his head, like everything else.

"We'll ride," he said surlily. "I'd take a cab with—anyone else. I'll take a cab now too."

They were still a little early when they got there. She didn't often go to an expensive show like this, apparently. She was starting to get all excited about it.

"I hope I look all right," she said nervously as they got out and went in. "I didn't know I was coming here when I started out."

"You look good enough," he said gruffly, turning his head the other way.

They had a drink at the bar in the theater foyer while the place slowly filled up behind them. At one point a voice from the crowd milling around behind their backs called out shrilly to the girl, "Hello, Gaby. Doing all right for yourself?"

"As you see," his companion answered flippantly.

He didn't bother looking around to see who the other girl was. A whiff of perfume stayed behind.

"That your name—Gaby?" he asked dully, twiddling his glass around.

"Yes. Short for Gabrielle. I would have told you myself, only I didn't think you wanted to know."

"I still don't. Shall we go in?"

An usher took them down to their seats. He paid her for two programs, and a minute later the musicians started to climb up into their pit, just in front of them. The overture was run through, the house lights went down, the curtain went up, the show began.

He didn't pay much attention to her, but he heard her laughing at

all the right places, so she must have been enjoying herself. Her eyes were shining when the lights went up again and everyone went outside for the intermission.

"Good, wasn't it?" she said enthusiastically.

"Glad you like it," he said, as taciturn as ever. The grouch was wearing off little by little, but it still wasn't all gone.

They had a couple more cognacs outside, then went in again and finished out the second half of the show. When they came out after the show was over he hailed a cab once more.

"Well, I guess here's where—" she started to say uncertainly.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said curtly. "I'm taking this over to Avenue Victor Hugo. I won't go out of my way for you, but I'll drop you off any place along the way you say, if that'll help you any."

"All right," she said, stepping in. "I'll ride as far as the Etoile. I can get my bus from there. I live all the way—"

"Never mind where," he cut her short. But she'd enjoyed herself too much, and at absolutely no cost, to take offense at anything.

"I don't know what it was all about," she said in the cab, "but I certainly had a good time."

When they started rounding the Place de l'Etoile he rapped on the glass, had the driver slow up a minute so she could step down.

"Well, good night," she called back cheerfully from outside. "Good hunting."

"Night."

A minute later, before she was even out of sight behind him he could hardly remember what her face looked like. He would have known it if he'd seen it, of course, but he couldn't have described it if he'd been asked to. Not that he wanted to.

He left the cab himself only a few blocks further on, short of where he lived. He wasn't exactly a stranger in Paris; he hadn't given any exact address in front of her. He wanted a little exercise, anyway, before he went up to his apartment. He wanted to get cigarettes too—she'd been hard on his just now. He paid for them out of his pocket change, like he had the cab a moment ago. He had too much change to split another bill.

A man who didn't live in the house was standing there talking to the concierge when she let him into his apartment building. He kept his back carefully turned toward the man, whoever he was, and he and the concierge fell quiet until he'd gone by. But he didn't pay any attention to either of them, just muttered "Night," went to the back of the hall, brought the elevator down, and took himself up slowly in it.

The lights were out in the upper halls, as they always were by this time of night, but he had an optical illusion of a hairline of orange van-

ishing along the lower seam of his door as his eyes came up flush with the floor. He went over, explored for the keyhole, put his key in, and opened up.

He stepped in past the dark threshold, found the bulky china hall switch and turned it on. Then he took his key out closed the door again after him and went on into the living room.

"Germaine, I'm back!" he called out. He shied his hat over toward where he remembered the sofa to be before he did anything about the lights in there. He called out a second time, more loudly, "Come on, cut it out, Germaine! I know you're not asleep. I saw you put the lights out just now."

He started for the switch, one arm straight out before him, but something happened to the switch. It went on by itself, before he had even touched it. He jumped spasmodically at the unexpected light that drenched him. He saw a hand, turned inward toward the wall, slithering off the switch. His eyes raced up the black-serge sleeve it protruded from, to a man's face.

He gave a jerky quarter-turn to the right, and there was another face looking at him, full body height, from behind the sofa. He gave another jolting quarter-turn, and a third one was just emerging from behind the mirrored closet door behind him.

He was so stunned at the triple, deathly silent apparition that he even took a good look at a lampbase over by the window to make sure he hadn't somehow gotten into the wrong apartment by mistake. But it was their own light blue lampbase, with the familiar parchment shade above it, complete down to grease-spot and all, and Germaine's picture was there beside it on the little table.

"What are you men doing in my apartment?" he said.

The middle one, between light switch and closet—they had narrowed their semi-circle about him now—said in a husky voice: "You live here?"

"Sure. Certainly I live here." He turned toward the short passage leading to the closed bedroom door.

"Germaine!" he called, as though demanding an accounting from her of their presence here.

He said, to the men, "What is it? What's up?"

They continued maddeningly to ask their own questions, instead of answering his. "Your name is Roger Temple?"

"Germaine! Where is she?"

"You are the husband of Germaine Temple?"

"Were we robbed? Was she run over? What's happened?" His voice rose to an exasperated shout. "Talk, will you! Say something!"

"Restrain yourself, Mr. Temple."

"She's in there, isn't she? Why are you trying to keep me out of

there? Take your hands off—let me go in there. I live here! It's my house!"

An obstructing arm fell across the passageway opening.

"Germaine!" he called out hoarsely, once again. One of them must have passed a signal behind him that he didn't see. The arm suddenly dropped and he went through, flung the door back, stopped dead.

The light was on in there. She was on the bed, completely covered up as though she had a chill. She was asleep or ill—or something. But still it was impossible that she hadn't heard him calling her inside. He took two lurching steps over to the side of the bed, with his knees already begining to sag under him.

They'd come in after him. Vaguely, he had an impression that everything he did was being watched, was being made to count for or against him. But he had no time for anything but her.

He bent down close above her, shook her slightly through the covering. Germaine only moved as he moved her. He seemed to want to turn the covering down, but he also seemed to be afraid to. He looked around at the men uncomprehendingly, but their eyes were just boring into his face.

They didn't offer any explanation. He looked fearfully over at the nightstand on the other side of the bed, but there was no glass on it, no small bottle or vial or prescription box.

They were trying to lead him back, away from her, now.

"Why doesn't she answer me?" he asked them helplessly. Suddenly he squirmed free, threw off their restraining hands on his arm, whipped back a narrow triangular corner of the covering from the far side.

Her hair was lustrous, rippling there about her in the shape of an open fan. Its faint, familiar perfume, a little like verbena, reached him again, he was bending so close. She stared up at him and he down at her. Their eyes that had met so many times before, met again. Hers were too large, too strained, as though he had frightened her by uncovering the top of her face like that.

Temple was whispering in English now his pet name: "Jerry! What is it, Jerry?"

He started to go backward by main force. He caught at the edge of the covering as he did so, and that lowered it still farther. Just a little farther.

He couldn't understand what it was doing there for an instant, that necktie of his around her swollen, mottled throat. The one with the polka-dots that he'd bought at the Louvre—but all out of shape, so knotted, so twisted, so half-hidden in her soft skin.

He heard hands slap resignedly against someone's side, behind him,

and a voice said: "There it is. You asked for it." That was the last thing.

II

HE DIDN'T remember her right away when he woke up. He was stretched out on the living room sofa and the bedroom door was closed again. He thought he'd come home drunk and passed out on the sofa. He saw them standing around, and thought they were people who had helped him in from the street. He struggled to a sitting position, saluted weakly and murmured, "Thanks, fellows."

He dropped his feet to the floor and sat crouched over for a minute, holding his head.

Then through his outspread fingers he saw her picture over there beside the blue-based lamp, and he snatched his hand down as though he'd burnt it, and it came back. It came back slowly, horribly slowly. And as it came back his face puckered up with equal slowness, almost a fold at a time. He rammed the back of his fist against his mouth as a gag and choked out:

"Get out of here, will you? For the love of Pete, get out of here! I don't want you to see me—"

They didn't get out. They just moved away and pretended not to see him. When the tears came it was terrific; it turned him inside out. One of them poured out a big water glass full of brandy and left it

on the edge of the table without looking at him.

Finally Temple raised his head and said, "All right. It's over now. You can begin." The water glass was empty.

They shrugged with the suavity of the French. One of them sat down at the other end of the sofa from him and offered him a French cigarette.

"I can't go them. There're some American ones in that box over there. Have one yourself."

It began so offhandedly, you couldn't tell it had started at all until it had already been under way for some little time. He had always heard they were the smartest police in Europe.

"Ah yes, they are noticeably milder than ours; you hardly know you have anything on your tongue. Try one, Billot. Madame was French, was she not?

"Yes. We were married here five years ago. I have a job with the Paris branch of the City National Bank, you know."

"Yes, we already know that."

There was a slight hitch; then it went on again, smooth as ever. "At what time did you leave the house tonight, Mr. Temple?"

"About five-thirty, I'd say."

"You dined out, in that case?"

"Yes, I dined out."

"Alone, or with madame?

"I dined out alone."

"Was that your usual custom?"

"No, it wasn't." He went ahead, without waiting for the next, obvious link in the questioning. "I'll tell you frankly, we had a disagreement."

"Ah. Well, pardon the intrusion at a time like this, but it is necessary, you understand. Was it an important disagreement or a minor one?"

"To others it might seem minor. To us, at the time, it seemed terribly serious, because we were so—she and I, you know—" He took a minute or two out again at this point.

"Let me hold her picture while I talk, will you? No, I'm all right. Don't worry."

They brought it over to him and he laid it flat across his knees and kept looking down at it while he talked. Once in a while he'd have to wipe the glass clear with his cuff, to get rid of those starry-rayed splashes that blurred it from time to time.

Then, unnoticeably but inexorably, they resumed again. "What was the nature of the disagreement?"

"It was about two theater tickets."

"Ah." Six eyebrows went up in sympathetic understanding of how little domestic spats like that went.

"This is what? Wednesday. As far back as last week, already, she began saying, 'Let's go to a show. I'd like to see the revue at the Casino. They say it's good.' Well, I promised we'd go, but I kept putting it off. Not purposely. I'd forget to stop in at the ticket brokers' on my way home from work. Each night when I came in she'd say, 'Well, did you get the tickets yet?' 'Damn, I forgot! I'll get them tomorrow without fail.' That's how it went.

"First she just looked disappointed. Then she pouted. Monday she frowned about it. Tuesday she was cross. Well, I finally got them this afternoon. Two good tickets, too. I was lucky. There'd been a last minute cancellation. Five minutes after I walked out of the broker's, I ran into an old friend of mine from New York who's taking the plane back tomorrow. He wanted me to go on a farewell party with him tonight. I went to school with him and he means a lot to me. But I said, 'No, I've been promising Germaine long enough. If I don't keep my word and take her tonight, she'll never forgive me.'

"By the time I got away from him and reached home it was almost five. I said, "Well, I finally got those tickets and we're going to-

night.' No enthusiasm. I said, 'What's the matter, don't you want to go now, after all?' 'Well, not tonight, I'm not in the mood.' If she'd even said she wasn't feeling well, had a headache, that would have been excuse enough for me. But no, she wouldn't give any reason at all, just: 'I don't feel like it tonight. Don't ask me why. I just don't feel like going out, that's all.'

"One word brought on another. You know how it is. 'Well, this is a fine time to tell me, after I turned down Jack Bridges on your account!' The more indifferent she acted about it, the angrier I got. Finally, after arguing for about half an hour, I blew up. 'If you don't come with me to that show, I'm going out on the streets and take along the first girl I come across, in your place!' "

He looked remorsefully down at the picture.

"Didn't I?" he murmured inaudibly.

"And then?" they prodded tactfully.

"She said, 'Go ahead, maybe you'll enjoy her company better than mine.' And I shouted, 'I'm sure I will!" I grabbed my hat, I slammed the door, and I never saw her—alive—again." His voice ran down like a clock that needs winding.

They didn't say anything for a while. Suddenly he caught a flurry of motion over by the hall passage, out of the corner of his eye. Temple tried to jump up, only they bore down on his shoulders.

"No, don't take her like that," he cried bitterly. "Like a sack of charcoal! Not so soon! Maybe—Maybe—Are you sure it's all over? Did the doctors say so? Make them look again!"

"Calm yourself, m'sieur. It's useless."

But he gained his feet and pulled the police after him a short distance, dragging the rug into folds under his heels, until their greater strength finally overcame the momentum of his despair and brought him to a standstill in the middle of the room.

"Don't punish yourself. There is nothing which can be done."

"You can get the man who did it. That much can be done, at least!" he flared resentfully.

Very low, very innocuously: "We are in the process of doing that." If there was any implication in the remark, he failed to notice it.

"Why do you stand questioning me all night? Why don't you get busy and go after him? What does the concierge say? Who was up here? Who left here after I did?

There was a pause.

"Nobody," a quiet voice answered finally. The silence pounded and beat and smashed around the room after that, while that single word that was the whole story seemed to hang there suspended in mid-air over his head. *Personne.*

"What? he breathed finally.

"But somebody was up here—somebody must have been. Where was the concierge at the time, Dubois or whatever her name is?" He stopped a moment, went on: "She saw me leave, didn't she?"

"No, sir," was the grave answer.

Temple sat down on the sofa. Sort of folded back onto it.

"As you perhaps know, her young daughter has been seriously ill in their quarters at the back of the house. She has been in attendance upon her every possible moment that could be taken from her duties. She never saw you leave again after she admitted you the first time at five o'clock. You were perhaps too overwrought to notice at the time, but she was not on duty at the actual moment of your departure, whatever time it was."

"I see," Temple said limply, letting his wrists dangle down over his knees. "Then no one saw me leave when I did, at about five-thirty. And it's important that I prove that I did leave then. Is that it?" He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Well, gentlemen, I cannot," he said finally.

One of them rested a hand on his shoulder, said, not threateningly but in a tone of serious warning: "Mr. Temple, it's more than important. It's crucial for your own sake that you establish corroboration for the precise time at which you left here."

"But if no one saw me, how can I?"

"Detail your movements after leaving here. We will try to reconstruct a time table from them. Let us warn you, the exact moment of madame's death is known to us, down to the half minute. Not through medical examination—by a far more accurate means. Now proceed."

He'd taken Germaine's picture back on his knees again. He reddened a little, looked down at it, as if telling it only to her in a low voice. "I did what I said I'd do, like a fool. I walked rapidly from here down to the Etoile, then from there on down the Champs, on the right hand side. Just opposite the automobile showrooms at the Ronde Pointe, there was a girl waiting to cross over.

"I invited her to go to the show with me and she accepted. We continued the rest of the way downtown together, walking more slowly. Somewhere around the Opera we dined together at a little restaurant called—oh, I can't remember. My mind was still full of our quarrel."

"At what time did you enter this restaurant?"

"It must have been seven by then."

"That is not quite satisfactory. Madame was dead by then. You could have taken a taxi from here afterwards, and still arrived at the restaurant at seven. You understand, we make no allowances in this. We are the police."

"Understood. You are the police."

"Well, at what time did you meet this girl?"

"Much earlier, from forty minutes to an hour earlier. It could not have been later than six at the most. I'm a fast walker. I've often walked from here to the Ronde Pointe in half an hour, and tonight I was walking rapidly."

"That's more like it. Then if you met her at six, where you say, that's all there is to it. It's simply a matter of obtaining her corroboration. Where does she live?"

He gave an acquired French shrug. "I don't know. I never saw her before."

"Well, what's her name? We can trace her in that way."

"I don't know. I didn't ask her anything about herself."

"Not even her small name, her first name?"

"Not even that." He'd forgotten the incident in the theater foyer by now.

"Well, describe her to us, at least."

"I can't even do that. She was just a blur the whole time she was with me. Oh, she had a face, I suppose, but—"

They looked at one another cynically. "Mr. Temple, this is serious. Think well. You expect us to believe that you were out with a young woman, up until less than an hour ago, and yet you cannot describe her? It is preposterous."

"It is preposterous!" he agreed hotly. "You're trying to lead up to the supposition that I killed my wife. Isn't that it?"

"No," he was assured, "we are not trying to. We would much prefer not to have to. It is only if you leave us no alternative that we will have to fall back on it. You were the last person to see her alive. There can be no question about that. You were the last person seen to come up here by the concierge. There can be no question about that either.

"You try to vouch for your whereabouts between five-thirty and seven by presenting us with a person without a face, without a form, without a name, without height or width or thickness, or color of eyes, or color of hair and you expect us to believe in her. It is not permissible."

"Did I come back here just now like a wife killer? Did you hear me call out her name before I had even put the lights on? Is that the way a murderer returns to the scene of his crime?"

"We took note of that," they answered quietly, "and it would have been more of a point in your favor not to have mentioned it yourself, to let us draw our own conclusions."

"They seem to have been drawn already. I am already in the position where everything I say is the wrong thing, everything I do only convicts me the more. If your minds

are already made up, what is the use of continuing? I don't ask you to understand what she meant to me, how impossible it would be for me to have harmed her; I don't wear my heart upon my sleeve. I do ask you this: if I killed her, why did I return here? Why didn't I run out? I had nearly a six-hour start."

They brushed that aside. "The sensible thing to do in any event would have been to come back, wouldn't it? Flight is a confession of guilt. How far could you have gone? Only to the first wayside station where a telegram caught up with your train."

"Well, give me a motive then. Give me a strong enough motive at least! Don't insult my regard for her. Am I supposed to have killed her over two theatre tickets?"

"We would not have proceeded this far with you, Mr. Temple, merely on an assumption like that. The motive has been glaringly evident from the beginning, rest assured."

"It has? What was it, then? What is it supposed to have been? I demand to know."

"It is for us to tell you?" they smiled knowingly. He saw one glance over at a framed dry-point on the opposite wall of the room.

"Oh, so you already know there's a safe there? You don't miss much, do you? Wait a minute, let me see something!"

Temple got up from the sofa abruptly, strode across the room, swung the dry-point askew on its cord, out of the way, and revealed a small built-in plaque tipped with a dial. He flicked it familiarly around a couple of times, opened it, stuck his hand in.

They watched without making any attempt to interfere.

He stood looking at them, hand empty. "There's your motive," he said with bitter satisfaction. "Someone cleaned this thing out, perhaps forced her to give the combination. There was seven thousand dollars in francs cash in that, and some pieces of jewelry belonging to her. Someone broke in here shortly after I left."

"There were no marks of forcible entry, Mr. Temple."

"Well, gained admittance under false pretenses, then killed her to stifle any possible outcry."

"There was no robbery here," one said in a flat tone that admitted of no dispute.

"But I tell you there were seven thousand dollars in French francs in that wall-safe!"

"It has not left the apartment, Mr. Temple." The velvet had worn off them long ago. They were not brutal, just flinty automatons of the law. One of them, sitting on the sofa, did something with his heel under it, and a small fitted traveling case, initialled G. T., shot out from below, its lid rearing as it did so from the quantity of clothing jammed into it. On top of a pink undergarment that spilled out all

around the sides like foam, lay a little chamois jewel-bag and a packet of banknotes.

Suddenly an unfinished note had flashed from somewhere, was dangling before his eyes It had been crumpled, as though in ungovenable rage, but now it was smoothed out again It bore only a handful of words, in writing that he recognized to be Germaine's.

Dear Roger: It is useless to continue. I am—

The stem of the last letter trailed in a long diagonal line off the paper at its lower corner, as if the writer had been seized from behind, with pen-point still to paper, by someone looking over her shoulder.

The note vanished again, whipped away out of sight as phantomlike as it had appeared. A paper crackled in a pocket lining, and it was gone. The valise with the currency and jewel bag remained there a moment longer.

"You ask us to believe you did not see these things until now?"

Temple didn't answer. The second blow was too stunning, coming as soon after the first one. He sat down.

"You did not turn back at the first street corner, spurred on either by awakening suspicion or else repentance for your hasty words—which one is immaterial—and find madame on the point of leaving your house, with your money and the jewelry you had given her?"

He wasn't listening. A low tortured cry broke from him. "You have taken her away from me a second time! You miserables! Did I have to know—couldn't you leave me anything?"

The picture slipped from his lap and fell face upward on the carpet at his feet. "I tell you this—and make the most of it: if I had returned, as you seem to think I did, and found"—he motioned to the wall safe, the valise— "I surely would have killed her. As surely as you found her now!"

"That is the hypothesis upon which we are proceeding against you," they agreed as they escorted him out.

* * *

NN29 22 CABLE VIA NBN
PARIS, SEPT 20
NLT JOHN BRIDGES

NEW YORK

HAVE BEEN TRIED AND CONVICTED OF GERMAINES MURDER AS YOU NO DOUBT HAVE READ IN PAPERS MY LAWYER OVER HERE HAS REACHED THE END OF HIS RESOURCES THIS IS TO ASK YOU TO COME OVER AND HELP ME I HAVE NO OTHER CHANCE OF PULLING THROUGH SENTENCE IS TO BE CARRIED OUT SECOND WEEK OCTOBER

ROGER TEMPLE

III

"WHAT DID you mean by 'sentence', in that cable? Not—not capital?"

Temple drew his finger slowly across his throat, for answer.

"Not the guillotine!"

"Certainly. This is the death house I'm in right now. Don't you recognize it?"

"But that's barbarous! I thought they were so lenient about crimes of passion over here—"

"There were three factors against any leniency", Temple said. "This was not a case of a woman killing a man, but of a man killing a woman. Another thing, I'm American and she was French. Finally, just to kill whatever slight sympathy I might otherwise have been entitled to, it came out that I was gambling with foreign exchange francs into dollars and dollars into francs. That's how I happened to have that sum in cash in the wall safe at the apartment.

"The French always see red when they suspect a foreigner of tampering with their exchange. Not that I didn't have a fair trial. I did. If we could only have bridged that missing hour and a half between five-thirty and seven, I would have been acquitted. Or else Gregoire, my French lawyer, could easily have won his appeal on the strength of new evidence.

"Here's how it worked: the time of her death was determined to the exact minute. How? Well, she had on a small wrist watch that I'd given her. As she fell to the floor in her death paroxysm the back of her hand struck the footpost of the bed. The dial broke, the watch stopped at exactly one and one half minutes to six. Their microscopes showed a tiny nick there on the veneer of the wood, a tiny particle of glass adhering to it.

"They drove me around the Opera district in an official car the next day, until I finally recognized and identified the restaurant. I hadn't even been able to remember its name until then. Clement's. I was vaguely identified in turn by the waiter, not without a great deal of uncertainty. Quick turnover, hundreds of faces—he just aimed the food at the tables without bothering to look at the customers much.

"And damn it, I've gone so native I don't even talk with an accent any more, or leave more than a strict ten percent tip. Nothing to plant me firmly in his memory. I seem to have played in rotten luck all the way through that night.

"About the girl, it was even worse. She must have been sitting with her back to the room—very ungentlemanly of me—and the waiter kept coming up behind her. The most they could get out of him was, if I had been at Table Six there had probably been a girl with me. He had served nothing but twosomes during the whole rush

hour, but he couldn't remember what she looked like any more than I could.

"Still, weak as the corroboration was, it probably would have been sufficient, if we had only had the girl to throw at him. Seeing her, he would have remembered her. The restaurant was not the crux of my defense anyway. That I had had a girl with me there proved nothing in my favor; that was already a full hour after the murder.

"Do you get the point? Do you understand what sank me now? If I could have proved that I met that girl at six, down by the Ronde Pointe—innocent. I couldn't have been in two places at once. I didn't leave her after I once met her, and Germaine fell to the floor before six.

"Showing up at the restaurant with her at seven was no good at all, no matter how many people were willing to admit they had seen me with her then. Only she and she alone could say how long I had been with her by then. I could have gone back to the house between five-thirty and five fifty-eight and one-half, as they claimed I did, killed Germaine, left again unobserved, picked up this girl at the very restaurant door, and still showed up inside with her at seven."

"But they didn't prove that you did. Go back to the apartment, I mean, and kill her."

"Evidently they didn't have to.

I couldn't prove that I didn't, and circumstantial evidence was too heavy against me. Someone let themselves in with the master key to the building's street door, they claimed. And since it was hanging there on the rack in the concierge's unguarded alcove, both before and after, who but someone who had already been legitimately admitted once, then had left again, appropriated it on their way out, re-entered unseen by means of it, returned it to the rack when they left the second time, still unseen—who but myself, in other words?

"For there was no one else who was found to have left again that evening after she had admitted them. My own private theory is that I left in such a huff I didn't close the street door properly after me and it swung partly open again. But I shut up about it. It would have looked too much as if I intended sneaking back in again and catching Germaine on the lam.

"Another thing. We were the only fifth floor tenants in occupancy at the time. A fourth floor tenant, then a third floor tenant, re-

turned after I did between five and five-thirty, left the lift at their respective landings. Yet shortly after six, when still a third tenant returned, helplessly overladen with bundles so that she could not even free a hand to push the recall button and Madame Dubois had to do it for her, they both had occasion to notice, glancing up the unobstructed shaft, that it was resting up at the fifth again.

"That it was my necktie, even, with which the murder was performed, counted against me, as fantastic as it may sound to you. When they heard from the police that I was not an untidy man, that every other tie of the dozens I owned was hanging in place, undisturbed, in a great sheaf from a vertical tie-rack,—one of those things like a fish's spinal column, you know—they could not be expected to believe that this one and this one alone might just possibly have been left out. That it could be over the back of a chair or on the bureau, where the murderer could lay his hands on it at random, as he dragged her into the bedroom from the living room, where he had first seized her.

"No, it was the owner of that tie himself who had made such ghastly use of it, and no one else. And how did they arrive at that conclusion? Well, for one thing, there were so many other articles about the room that might have been used to garrot her instead, a stranger would never have gone looking for a necktie hanging far out of sight in the depths of a clothes closet, especially with a struggling woman on his hands.

"For another, I was wearing a blue suit that day, the policemen took pains to notice, a blue shirt, yet I had on a brown tie, a color that clashed, when I returned near midnight. The blue would have blended, and it was reasonable to suppose that was the tie I had on originally before I made use of it as a noose. The well-dressed boulevardier would sooner cut his throat than wear a brown tie with a blue shirt. And because a man, dressing to go to work one morning, thoughtlessly puts on the wrong color necktie, that helps to prove him a murderer before the end of the day!

"Well, I've told you all this at such length simply to drive the point home. None of it would have really counted, if I only had that girl to speak up for me. Without her, it all counted; each little petty detail added its little grain of weight, and the sum of them all crushed me.

"You must find this girl, Jack. That's my only salvation."

"What was the matter with this Gregoire? Didn't he try at all? You must have selected a lousy lawyer.

"Only half-heartedly. He had shaped his whole defense along other lines. He wanted to get me off on the crime of passion premise. He didn't like the idea of a co-

cotte sticking her nose into it, especially one I had taken to dinner and a show the very night of the murder. Dragging her into it would only alienate sympathy from me as a devoted husband, he felt. I pleaded with him, I begged him; he insisted I had a better chance without her than with her.

"Well, he was proven wrong. They brought out this foreign exchange matter, for one thing. The girl was referred to anyway, but without the benefit her direct personal testimony would have given me. In the end she harmed more than helped me.

"The police tried to locate her too—not to help me but for their own purposes, of course. Hoping on the one hand to prove she was just a last minute alibi, picked up outside the restaurant at seven; managing, on the other hand, to leave a distinct impression she was fictitious, by not finding her. People said to one another, I suppose, 'Listen, when the Sûreté fails to turn up a girl, rest assured there is no such girl, the waiter at the restaurant and all the others to the contrary.'

"Finally, after I was already sentenced, I hired a private detective agency to work on it, on my own. They drew a blank too; finally gave up a couple of weeks ago. That was when I cabled you. You see, I couldn't give any of them enough to work on, enough to get their teeth into. The most they could do was run ads in the papers: 'Will the young lady who attended the performance of October fifteenth, Casino de Paris, Row Double-A, with an American gentleman, kindly communicate—' That sort of thing. It didn't get a nibble."

Jack Bridges sat down on the edge of the cot beside Temple and blew his breath despairingly through his clasped hands. "Whew! And if the police failed, private detectives failed, imagine what a chance I stand. I don't even know the town as well as you, never have. It's eleven months ago now, too. And especially if she was a cocotte, what chance is there of her remembering whether it was at six or seven a stranger spoke to her, that one evening out of all the other hundreds, let alone remembering he spoke at all?"

"That part I'm not worried about, if you could only get within hailing distance of her. She went to a better restaurant and a better show that one night than probably ever before or since, so she'll remember me. The abruptness of the invitation, too, would be enough to make it stick clearly in her mind. And then the fact that we dined together at all was conditioned by the fact that we met as confoundedly early as we did.

"That's about the only thing I can remember at all distinctly, out of everything she said. She'll remember me, she'll remember I met her a good two and a half hours

ahead of show time—but where the hell is she?"

"Yes, but the trial was in all the papers here. It must have been. How is it she didn't come forward and testify for you while it was on?"

"Do they bother reading papers much, her type?" Temple asked ruefully. "I don't imagine so."

"She may have drifted to South America or North Africa, like so many of them do, long ago."

"That thought," Temple admitted, letting his head droop slowly, "has had me terrified for a long time."

"Well then, let's rule it out right at the beginning. No use borrowing trouble. We can't just sit here until they come to shave the back of your neck. Let's take it for granted she's still in Paris somewhere; it's going to be tough enough as it is."

"I'm stubborn enough not to want to die. I've gotten over the second jolt by now—the real bad one that came after the first—and, well, the cause doesn't seem worthy enough any more."

"You're not going to," Bridges assured him grimly. "I've come three thousand miles and I hocked myself up to the ears. I want some return on my trouble." Which was his way of saying he thought something of Roger Temple.

He shuffled around the cell a while, hands in pockets, looking down at his own feet. Finally he stopped and said, "You've got to give me a little something, no matter how trifling, to go by. I'm not a magician. I can't just pull her out of a top hat. Didn't you look at her face at all?"

"It must have gotten in the way a couple of times, but it didn't take."

"Well, let's run through it once more. Don't look at me like that. It's the only thing we can do. She was standing on the curb at the Ronde Pointe, waiting to cross over. Give me your first impression if you can. Try to recapture it. Sometimes it gives a keener insight than a second look at closer range."

"She had on a skirt, so she was a girl, and she wasn't using crutches, so she was able-bodied."

Bridges just gave him a look, made a disgusted pass with his hand.

"I was looking over her shoulder, seeing Germaine in my mind's eye the whole time. What do you expect me to be able to tell you?"

"What was her voice like? You've been living her long enough to know a little about dialects. What was hers?"

"Pure Paris twang, about as colorless as boiled water."

"Then this was her home town, at least, whatever good that does us."

"I remember one thing."

"What?" said Bridges, perking up alerty.

"She was ready to give her life's history at a moment's notice. I stopped her. How did I know that

was going to endanger my life, to shut up a talkative woman?"

Bridges slumped down again. "In the restaurant, what?" he asked.

"She'd nearly choked on a fishbone once, she said. They had to hold her arms up over her head and frighten her by popping an expanded paperbag in front of her face."

"You're driving me crazy. You sure must have loved Germaine."

"I did—then. Shut up about it."

"Go ahead."

"She suggested walking to the Casino. That showed instinctive frugality, even though it wasn't her money."

"They all seem to have the trait. Go on."

"When we got there she was worried if she looked good enough to go in."

"You looked at her then, at least?"

"I looked the other way."

"This is torture," Bridges said, gnawing his nails.

"We sat down at the bar—"

Bridges made a grab for his shoulder. "There's something! You were both sitting right under the bar man's eyes."

"Temple's usual luck. She absolutely failed to register on him. There was a redhead, a personal friend of the bartender's, sitting two stools up at the time. He only had eyes for her. He couldn't even identify me by my face. Know how he finally did?"

"How?"

"By the part of my hair. I wear it unusually far over on one side, you know. I must have been staring down into my brandy the whole time."

"I never knew there were so many blind people in any city at one time!" Bridges exploded wrathfully. "This girl must have been made of glass. All right, during the performance? Not much chance there, I suppose, in the dark, if you didn't see her in a brightly lighted restaurant."

"Well, I managed to drag one thing up out of limbo by sheer power of concentration. There was a big production number at the opening of the second act, in which Elysia, the star, threw little nosegays of artificial violets to the women customers from the stage apron. Being in the first row, this girl next to me was the first person in the whole audience to be singled out for one."

"You think she's so sentimental she kept hers all this time—is that the idea?"

"No. But this Elysia must at least have had to look beforehand, to decide who was going to get the first one."

"Casino shows usually run all season. That's twenty-six weeks. Eight shows a week. She went through that one hundred and twenty-eight times, with several hundred upturned faces before her each time, and a set of lyrics on

her mind in addition. Do you know what you're asking?"

Roger Temple closed his eyes mutely.

"Just the same I'll interview her," Bridges went on. "Find out, if nothing else, what mental processes entered into her selection of those she threw to. Something might lurk, in that, unless it was just pure reflex action. I'll rake them all up—the usher who seated you, the musicians who were playing down by your feet— Now, anything else before I begin?"

"That's all there is. Sometimes I think she must have been a ghost."

"I know who the ghost will be, if we don't get a move on," Bridges said brutally. "Let's see what we've got. A girl who, to get home, took a bus from the Etoile, which line or in which direction we don't know. Also, exactly eleven months ago, she had in her possession a small favor of artificial violets. And she was probably not beautiful or she would have been noticed by more people. Not homely either, by the same token. And I've got to find her, out of about a million and a half women, in less than three weeks."

He hammered on the bars to be let out.

"Take it easy," Temple smiled ruefully after him. "And whether it works out or not, thanks for trying."

"Oh, I'll get her!" came echoing dismally back along the cell corridor. "But what's worrying me is how.

IV

ON THE fifteenth day before the execution, Jack Bridges didn't even have enough wind left in him by the time he had finished climbing to the sixth floor of the tenement, to raise his arm and knock. There was no doorbell. He just leaned there against the door frame, with his tongue hanging out, and scuffed the bottom of the panel with the toe of his shoe.

A blowsy woman, with her hair in her eyes and wiping her hands on her apron opened the door and let out a whiff of garlic.

"Bonfils—Suzanne Bonfils?"

That was as far as he got. "Listen, I've already been over to the office once and your directeur told me he'd give us until Wednesday. We'll pay for our gas. We're not trying to gyp the poor penniless company that needs the few paltry sous so badly."

"Lady, I'm not a collector. I simple wish to speak to the Suzanne Bonfils who worked as usher at the Casino last fall."

"Well, you are! And I wish I was back again—" She raised her voice, turned her head sideways, and seemed to wish someone other than Bridges to overhear her. "It was a lot better than supporting a lazy good-for-nothing who sits on the seat of his pants all day!" What

sounded like the hoarse grunt of a trained seal came from somewhere in the interior.

"What can I do for you?" she asked Bridges.

"A friend of mine wished to get in touch with someone who means a lot to him. It is a matter of the affections." It was useless to frighten these people ahead of time with talk of death sentences, jail visits for purposes of identification and all that; they would only shut up like clams.

"Now. Can you by any chance recall the night of October fifteenth last year, madame?"

"In what respect?"

"Can you recall seating an American accompanied by a young Frenchwoman, in the two right aisle center seats of Row Double-A?"

She threw up her hands, looked at him reproachfully. "You ask the impossible! All those faces, night after night!"

"But a sad-looking American, a sour, scowling American, think how rare that is! Try, madame. Think back."

"No," she said decidedly. "Out of my whole season there, out of all the people I seated, I can only recall a fat German who came one matinee full of beer, and that was because he snored so loudly they sent me down to wake him up and ask him to be quiet."

A hoarse voice from the rear said, "Get through out there, will

you? You're letting a draft in on my feet."

"If you'd keep your shoes on in the house once in a while, your feet wouldn't be so delicate!"

Bridges turned away and went disappointedly down the stairs.

The twelfth day before the execution, the woman had to stand close to Bridges and shout in his ear to make herself heard above the vibration.

"Yes, my husband is in. He is practicing," she said. "Come in. It won't hurt him to quit for a minute. He works too hard."

A man in shirt sleeves and looped suspenders was sitting before a drum. He looked up triumphantly. "How was that, my dear? With one hand only?"

Even after he had stopped, a desultory pounding continued coming through the floor, ceiling, and one wall. "Pay no attention, m'sieur; people without souls," he confided to Bridges.

"You worked in the Casino orchestra last year?"

"I still do this year."

"I wonder if you can remember an American with a grouchy face

who sat in Row AA, just above you in the pit, with a French girl, one night in October a year ago?"

Instead of answering directly the musician cleared his throat, said to his wife, "Would you—ah—get out my stiff shirt for tonight, my dear? I am leaving for work soon you of course know."

Then as soon as he and Bridges were alone, he confided, "There was an American with a grouchy face who sat in that row one night. He became grouchy because his companion was so taken up in admiration of my skill with the drum."

"Can you describe her?"

"I can do better than that." The musician looked around, touched his lower lip, took out a bill-fold, and presented a small snapshot for Bridges' inspection.

"Did the old man pass over yet?" he breathed anxiously. "She has the greatest admiration for my drum and percussion work."

"What old man?"

"Why, the American. He had white whiskers down to here. He was so old it took him a full ten minutes to get up the aisle afterwards. Hardening of the arteries, I think."

"Sorry to have bothered you, brother."

"But—"

The ninth day before the execution, the maid came back again, said, "Mademoiselle Elysia will see you now."

Bridges went in, had just about glimpsed a Cleopatra-like creature stretched out upon a chaise-longue, when a soft furry projectile of some sort shot out of the crystal chandelier over his head and landed on his shoulder with a squeaking sound. He jolted nervously. Something like a long velvet snake coiled affectionately around his throat.

"Don't be alarmed, that's only Zuzu," the actress said fondly. "That's a very good sign. He seldom takes to callers. Sit down, sir. A press interview?"

Bridges shook his head regretfully, gave her a buildup. "I've come to you because you are known to be as intelligent as you are talented."

"It is true, I am not dull," Elysia said, studying her fingernails.

"You recall a song you sang in last year's show, in which you threw violets to the ladies in the audience?"

"Wasn't I good?" she said warmly.

"I'm curious to know whether there was any special technique in your method. By that I mean, can you recall what motivated your choice of the first recipient, at each performance? Did you pick the nearest at hand? Did you pick the best dressed? How did you decide where to begin?"

She squirmed ecstatically. "I love to be psychoanalyzed. Let's see now. I always tried to pick the

plainest woman, because she would be the most appreciative, the most grateful for the unaccustomed mark of attention. What is the sense of throwing a small bunch of lovely violets to a woman with pearls around her throat or diamond clasps on her shoulders?"

"Plain," said Bridges brittlely. "I like the word. Plain in dress, or in face?"

"Both, whenever possible."

"But of course it is hopeless asking whether you remember an American with a long face, who sat in the first row one night in October, with a girl next to him in street clothes, plainly—almost shabbily dressed. A girl who received your first violets that night."

"It is difficult, but it may not be hopeless. It was a long song. I always sang three full choruses. I had plenty of time to scan the first row. The footlights illumined it thoroughly, unlike the ones further back. A shabby little girl, with an American—"

She got up, started to walk around to try to think better. The monkey changed shoulders, vaulted from him to her with a sound like a nail scratching glass.

"Ah, you are bringing something back to me. Now, wait. One night there was a wistful little shop girl sitting there in front of me with a man who could have been American. I noticed her because she was so Cinderella-like, her eyes shone so, the performance was so real to her. I remember wishing I—that is, how nice it is to be her age."

Bridges was starting to get excited too. It was catching. "What night, if you could only remember what night?"

"I can't remember dates, I never could—but it was around the time that Zuzu had the croup. I think it was that very night I came home and found him wheezing on the floor, his tail all limp. Marie!" The maid looked in again. "Look among my bills. See if you can find one from that doctor we called for Zuzu, the one who gave him oxygen through a bicycle pump. I want to know the date."

There was a breathless wait. The maid came back finally, reported: "It is dated the first of November last year, so it must have been some time during the month before."

"Wonderful!" Bridges shouted, and jumped up. This time it was the monkey who got a fright, dived headfirst under the sofa and pulled its tail in after it. Bridges stopped short. "But hold on! I'm letting my enthusiasm run away with me. It was undoubtedly they you saw. But that doesn't tell me who she is, how to contact her."

The actress snapped her fingers. "But that was not the end of it. There was more to it than that. I saw her again, at sloser range. I am sure I did. It seems to me— Wait, my driver may remember it better than I can. I'll send for him."

When he had come to the door, "Georges," she asked, "do you remember a young girl who came up to me one night, October of last year, as I was getting into the car after the performance?"

"But people do that nearly every night, to ask mademoiselle's autograph."

"Ah, yes, but I stopped and spoke to her, a thing I never do. You were standing right there, holding the door for me. You must have overheard. See if you can remember. What happened—did I give her money?"

"No. She said she was out of work and asked if you needed a maid. Instead you gave her a card to take to your costumers, told her to ask for a job in their sewing room."

"There it is! Go to Zalma's on the rue St. Honore. You will find her there. Or if not, at least they will be able to tell you her name, where she is now." Her eyes dancing, she said, "You see? Nothing's impossible for Elysia!"

That evening, Jack Bridges stopped in to telephone the desk clerk of his hotel before he did anything else. "Send two dozen roses to Elysia at the Casino tonight. And on the card, 'As intelligent as you are beautful!' "

The fourth day before the execution: "Miss Petion?" he asked, and the girl in the cottage doorway looked at him suspiciously. She was very plain-looking. Her face stopped just short of being actually a blank. "That is it."

Bridges mopped his brow and went limp with relief. "What a time I had tracing you."

The door started to edge closed again when she heard that. He wedged his foot in it, kept it open. "You worked at Zalma's, the theatrical costumer, about a year ago, before you came out here to the country?"

"Yes. And they should just try to prove I stole those dress fabrics! It was the girl on the next bench, if anyone, not I. I was unjustly accused—"

"I'm not interested in fabrics. I want to know if you are the girl who approached Elysia one night outside the theater as she was entering her car."

"Yes, it was through her I got the job."

"Great. Then only a night or two before that, you were sitting in Row Double-A, with an American?"

"What if I was? What about it? How is it you know so much?

"Never mind that. Get your things. I've got a taxi down the lane. I'm going to drive you back to Paris with me."

She shrank back inside the doorway. "No—what for? I haven't done anything!"

Bridges caught her by the wrist. "But I want you to identify him! You've got to identify him!"

Her face paled and she gave an

unearthly scream that went rolling down the quiet country lane. "How can I? What have they done to him? Oh, this is terrible!"

She tore herself away from Bridges by main force, not to retreat within the cottage, but to flash out past him and run flying down the lane, hands distractedly to her head letting out lamentations as she went.

He set out after her, after a stunned moment, but she was a swift runner and despair seemed to lend her wings. He only caught up with her finally when she had stopped, breathless, in a grassy fenced-in plot to one side of the road.

She was holding her hands over her heart in acute relief, looking down at something, as he came up behind her.

"Oh, how brutal to frighten me like that! He's still here— I thought you meant they had dug him up!"

On the headstone was inscribed:

Ici Repose
Bill Jones
Beloved husband of
Marguerite Jones,
nee Petion

V

THE THIRD day before the execution, Roger Temple asked dully, "How's it coming?" Then when Bridges didn't answer, "Never mind, I can tell by your face."

"That Elysia threw me for a loss. I wasted six full days tracing down a false lead she gave me. Of all the gabby dimwits—" He broke off, looked at Temple closely. "What's the matter?"

"Gabby? Gabby? Wait a minute, that did something to me then. Gaby! Her first name was Gaby! Someone in back of us called out 'Hello Gaby!' to her in the foyer during the intermission, but—"

Bridges finished it for him wearily. "Don't say it, I know. You didn't look around."

Temple smiled wanly. "Don't get sore about it. It's my neck."

"Sure it's your neck. Is that any reason why they should strop an axe-blade on it?" He poked his elbow against the greasy cell-wall and leaned his head gloomily against his hand. "It's hopeless. I can't get to her. I've been using the wrong method. I must find some way of bringing her to us. Of drawing her out of her anonymity, of making her step forward of her own accord. She can do that at any time she pleases. She's in control of the situation.

"If I could hit on the right inducement, find the right bait, we might still be able to work the trick. Advertising, appealing to her to come forward and reveal herself, without specifying any reward in it for her—well your French lawyer tried that and you see how far he got. Those people have no sense of gratitude; why should she get mixed up in a murder trial for a

foreigner? She said the hell with you. For another thing, she may have reasons of her own for staying away from the police and anything that has to do with them.

"So the inducement, the bribe, must seem to be a thing apart, entirely disassociated from you and your case, if it's going to succeed at all. But what? What will it be? What could it be?"

"Money, of course," Temple said listlessly.

"Obviously. It talks all over the world, and we're in a country where it talks twice as loudly as anywhere else. But that isn't the problem. How to get this money offer to strike at or near her, personally. That's the sticker."

He roamed around restlessly for awhile, hands clasped over the nape of his neck. "Run a contest for everyone whose first name is Gaby? Too clumsy and indirect, it would take in thousands of contestants, I'd have to hire a whole office-staff to help me with the details. There isn't time any more, either.

"I don't think a contest would interest her much, anyway, if it had anything to do with looks; she's too plain. If there was only something we knew she had that no one else, or at least very few others, were likely to have at the same time, we could make that the basis of our offer. At least stand some chance then of singling her out. Just one adjunct or possession would be enough to get me started, no matter how trivial or worthless it was.

"For instance, if you told me she had a certain kind of locket I would offer all kinds of money for that particular kind of locket, in hopes of getting her to show. But what do we know that she had?"

"She had that bunch of violets that Elysia threw her in the show," Temple said doubtfully.

"She probably sewed them on a dress, wore them out long ago."

"Did I tell you she also kept both the programs that night, my own as well as hers?"

"No you didn't," Bridges flared resentfully. He stopped, relented. "Sorry, boy. Are you sure about that? How is it you could recall a little thing like that, when you couldn't remember what she looked like at all?"

"I don't know, I recollect tossing mine onto my empty seat as we got up, and she leaned over across me and retrieved it. Then when she got out of the cab, she waved so long with the hand that she was holding them both in."

"If she bothered keeping them at all after she once got out of the theater, there's a good chance she's got them still. She obviously wanted them for souvenirs, and not to find out what the show was about after she'd already seen it once. And people hang on to their souvenirs for years." He was getting more and more excited as he talked.

"That's it. Don't you see? That's

it right there. That's what I've been looking for. Sure, it's a thousand-to-one shot, but with seventy-two hours left, we have no choice. We'll swing it through those two theater programs, if we swing it at all. It's our only chance, it's out last chance."

Hands shaking with intensity, he hauled out a pencil-stub and a used envelope, started to draft an advertisement on the back of it, holding it against the stone wall.

"Here it is," he said when he'd finished and showed it to Temple.

Turn our old theater programs into money. Theater programs are my hobby. Prices ranging from five francs to fifty cheerfully paid for items necessary to complete my sets. Bring them in, no matter how old, no matter how new! Specially wanted: Casino de Paris, last season. Open until eleven at night.

"I'm going to rent a vacant store, like they do to sell Christmas cards during the holidays. As soon as I tack the store address on, this is going into every morning and evening paper published in Paris. Now the thing is: have I narrowed it down too closely by mentioning the Casino? She's liable to smell a rat, stay away.

"On the other hand, the ad might have no meaning to her without that; she might think it only referred to old nineteenth-century curiosities. No, it'll have to stay in. It's got to hit her between the eyes. Something for nothing; the most sure-fire comeon in any man's town."

Temple said, "But it's only last year's show! If she hung on to her programs plenty of other people may still have theirs too. You're liable to be swamped with them."

"I'll have to chance that. I've got the money to pay for them all."

"What good will it do even if she does nibble? How will you know her? Just a Casino program in itself isn't incriminating."

"I know the date and there is a very good chance that I will recognize the program you held that night. If she has one, she will still have the other. Do you know how? Do you remember what you used to do, when we went to shows together in New York in the old days?"

Temple shook his head.

"Well I do, and that's what counts. Do you remember that nervous habit you had of turning down the upper-right-hand corners of each leaf of your program, the way people do the pages of a book when they want to remember their place in it? Only of course you didn't do it for that reason.

"It was just a form of doodling, an unconscious occupation of your fingertips as you sat watching the show—the way some people draw meaningless designs on the wall of a phone booth while they are waiting for a number. Your theater programs always ended up dog-

eared. I noticed that many times."

"Let's hope I still practiced it that night," Temple said, grimly.

"You had more reason that night than ever before. Your mind wasn't on the show; it was on your spat with Germaine. Those little fidgety crochets are hard to eradicate. Be that as it may, I have no time to hang around and reminisce about it. I've got too much to do—and not half enough time to do it in!"

The day before the execution:

"Clear some of these stacks of programs off the table, will you?" Bridges instructed the youth he had hired to help him. "I can hardly see the people that come in any more, over the tops of them. And I'm eating dust."

"Yes, sir. Where shall I carry them out of here."

The boy looked at him wide-eyed. "You buy them and you burn them?"

"Yes, it's an old American custom. Only keep it to yourself. Quiet, here comes somebody."

An old man in fur-collared coat, monocle, and with his hand thrust into his bosom in a Napoleon-like gesture, came in. Behind him appeared a blue-bloused porter dragging a small, ancient trunk.

Bridges rolled his eyes in dismay.

"Ah, sir. You are indeed lucky that I read your advertisement. I have some rarities here that will warm your heart. From the Comedie Francaise, as far back as ninety-hundred—"

Bridges motioned negatively. "I'm not interested in Comedie Francaise. I've got a full set."

"Odeon, then. Theatre Sarah Bernhardt—"

"Not interested, not interested. I don't care what else you've got, I am only interested in Casino de Paris, of last year. Have you one?"

"Casino de Paris, bah!" the old man sputtered in his face. "I used to be one of the greatest tragedians on the French stage. What have I to do with modern revues!"

"I can see that," Bridges said. "Kindly move on."

An old woman who looked like a char-woman approached in his wake. "You—you pay money for old programs? she faltered.

"Certain ones."

She fumbled in a market bag hanging over her arm. "I have only a few here, sir. From when I used to be in the chorus myself. I kept them all, they mean a lot to me. Folies Bergeres, twenty five years ago."

Bridges looked at her lined face, not the programs at all. "Two francs apiece."

She was nearly overcome with joy. "Oh, m'sieur, how wonderful! It will come in so handy. I never dreamed they were worth that much!"

"They aren't. Here you are, mother." Word-of-mouth advertising was important to him too.

She staggered out, almost drunk with the unexpected good fortune.

Bridges watched her go thought-

fully, then turned back with a disconsolate shrug of the shoulders.

A girl stod quietly in her place, unseen until now. She was all in black. Not a widow's black, but the black of frugality, poverty. She was the gamin type, the Paris street girl.

"What'll you give for a Casino de Paris? I noticed by the ad you were after them."

He shoved out his hand, tried to keep his voice casual. "Let's see it." It was the nine hundred and ninth that had showed up so far.

She opened a large, cheap handbag, tilted it over toward her so he couldn't look down into it, pulled a program out. She snapped the bag shut again first of all, before she did anything else. Then she shoved a colorful modern folder, in excellent condition, at him.

He thumbed throught it. "Tric-Trac, eh? Last year's show." The upper right-hand corners of the leaves were untouched.

But the date—it was the date. The date!

She said: "What do I get?"

"Got any more like this? I buy duplicates too, you know."

She gave him a searching look. He caught that little uncompleted start her hand made toward the clasp of her pocketbook. He started to breathe a little harder.

"What do you think I do, print them?" Her hand had dropped down again.

"I could give you a better price for two than for one," he said. "If you saw this show at all, you were probably with somebody. How about it? Can't you dig up another?"

Her eyes darted suspiciously around the store; she edged back a step or two from the table. "Come on. Do you want to buy or don't you? One is all I've got."

"Ten francs. For two I would have given you thirty. I like to build my collection in pairs."

'All right, ten. It's yours." She was obviously in a hurry to get outside again.

He shoved an inked pen and ledger toward her.

"What's that for?" she asked apprehensively.

He was trembling now.

"I insist on knowing from whom I buy, that's all. Just your name and address." Then, as she still hesitated: "Have you any reason for not wanting to identify yourself"

"No, of course not!"

She bent over the table, directly before him, touched pen-point to the book. He saw that false start, that half-circle her pen made, before it stopped again. All it needed was the stem to be a capital G. And even a fool could have told, by the momentary pause that followed, that she was groping for an assumed name. She added an awkward curlicue to the bottom of it finally, changed it into an S. But it was all out of proportion; you could tell it had been meant for something else.

She wrote "Solange Morel," thrust the ledger back toward him.

"You'd think I was filling out a marriage license, with all this red tape," she grumbled.

He steadied his voice with an effort.

"I like to know whom I buy from, I am not exactly in the rags-and-old-bottles business, you know."

She finished secreting the money in her bag, started out of the store. He let her get as far as the door, then called out, suddenly, in a low voice just barely sufficient to reach her: "Gaby."

She cast a sharp frightened look back over her shoulder at him. It wasn't just a look of casual curiosity; there was no one else in the store at the moment but the two of them, anyway.

Then as he rose, crooking his finger at her— "Come back here a minute" she broke into a run, rounded the store-entrance, flashed across the empty glass-front beside it, and disappeared.

He vaulted the desk, scattering the programs that remained all over the floor with little slaps, dashed out after her. She was running swiftly toward the next corner, but her short legs were against her.

And Bridges ran like one possessed.

In less than two minutes he had overtaken her, grabbed her roughly by the shoulder, halted and swung her around.

"All right, now there's no use. I've got you. You gave yourself away when you looked back at the sound of your own name just now. Open that pocketbook! Come on, open up that pocketbook or I'll do it for you!

She tried to break away from him. "Take your hands off me— let me alone!"

He yanked it so violently off her arm that the frayed strap broke. He opened it, plunged his hand in, It came out with a program identical to the one she had just sold him. He held her fast by one arm, let the pocketbook drop, blew the leaves of the program open with his breath. All the inner ones, from cover to cover, were neatly, diagonally folded over at the upper-right-hand tips.

"That does it," he said grimly and shoved it into his inside pocket. "And now, my elusive one, you're coming with me. And fast. Another twenty-four hours and—"

She was frightened now. "Let me go, I tell you! I haven't done anything."

"Are you coming peacefully, or do I have to drag you by the back of the neck? No harm will come to you, but I'm taking you to a friend of mine, to be identified and to identify in turn. It's necessary for you to give evidence in his behalf. Come on, there's no time to be lost. My car's been parked around the corner for two solid days, waiting for you to show up."

VI

BRIDGES thrust the protesting girl into his car, got in beside her, swerved it out into the downtown traffic stream. "Now don't try to jump out or anything when I have to stop for signals, or I'll smash you on the jaw!"

She shrank back against the seat leather, finally said timidly: "It's Temple, isn't it? The man they're guillotining?"

He assured her harshly, "You ought to be thrashed for nearly letting an innocent man go to his death when you could have saved him by coming forward!"

The girl regarded him for a long moment—surprised, suspicious.

"But—but didn't he tell you?

"Tell me what?"

She hesitated.

"I—well, I helped myself to his wallet that night we were in the cab together. Fifteen hundred francs. And for a long time I thought that was what they were after me for—"

"That's no excuse. In the beginning maybe, but later on you must have known what it was all about. you're yellow, just a little Paris gutter rat. But you're going to save Roger Temple, if you never do another decent thing in your life. You're going to tell them what time you met him that night."

"Six o'clock, she said. "I wanted to come forward, during the trial, honestly. It was that I didn't have the courage, m'sieur. For one thing, the wallet. For another—well, I'm married. If my husband had heard about my going to a show with a stranger—"

He said grimly, "Well, he's going to now, don't worry."

"Now it doesn't matter any more; he went off with a Belgian."

They raced through the dusk in silence, individual lights streaming by them like long, continuous neon-tubes.

Finally she said, "What're we going this way for? If he's to be executed tomorrow morning, isn't he being held at Vincennes?"

"I'm driving," Bridges glowered, eyes on the long straight road ahead. They were outside the city now, trees white-washed halfway up thir trunks to facilitate night driving ticking by like a picket-fence.

"But we're in Fontainebleau Forest. What're you bringing me way out here for?"

"Shut up." He swerved off the road into a clearing, killed his engine, threw the door open. "Get out."

She got out slowly, a frightened look growing on her pinched, white face.

He followed her down, cracked the car door shut again after he descended. It was pitch-black under the trees, but the headlights shining through made a sort of ghostly tunnel.

"Follow me," he said curtly.

"Come on. We'll walk straight ahead as far as the lights reach."

He pulled her after him by the wrist, stumbling over roots and scattering dried leaves.

The glowing lights of the car dwindled behind them. When they could barely see one another's faces any more, he stopped, turned her around toward him. "This is far enough. Now start walking back up that path of light toward where we left the car."

"But what are you going to do? What did we come way out here for? I don't like this—" Suddenly she looked down and saw the revolver in his right hand.

She choked back a scream. "Don't! Have pity on me! I'll talk, I'll tell them everything! I'll tell them how I met him at six that night! I'll be able to identify him, I've never forgotten his face—"

"That's all I wanted to know," he said. "Tell it to him when you meet him in hell at daybreak tomorrow morning."

She gave a single scream as he raised the gun, tried to flee aside into the protective darkness outside the headlight-beams. A shot echoed thunderously under the cavernous trees. Bridges stumbled back against a tree trunk, leaned there holding his shoulder while the gun fell out of his useless hand.

A man stepped out into the path of light, went up to him, gun bared. The girl was wailing incoherently, "Oh M'sieur Billot, he tried to kill me. It was awful—I didn't know you would come after us so quickly—"

"I didn't, I rode out with you, hidden in the rumble seat. It was the only safe thing to do, I had no way of knowing what direction he would take ahead of time, and I had a feeling minutes would count."

He stepped up to Bridges, clicked a pair of handcuffs shut around his wrists. "I place you under arrest for the murder of Germaine Temple."

"You haven't a bit of evidence against me!" Bridges answered, groaning with pain.

"What more evidence do I need than this—that you were on the point of murdering in cold blood a girl on whom you never set eyes until half-an-hour ago, simply because her evidence was the one thing could have saved Temple from paying for the crime, and therefore endangered your immunity? Come, *m'sieur*. The game is played out."

Another car had drawn up in the distance, on the highway near Bridges' parked car. Three figures came hurrying toward them down the pathway of light. "Is that you, Gregoire? the detective called out to them.

"Yes—did you get him? Did he do what you counted on his doing?

"Completely and damningly, before my very eyes. Tried to, that is. Your client is saved. You'd bet-

ter turn around and get back to Paris as quickly as possible. There is no use letting Temple go through the final night any longer than we can help it. Take mademoiselle with you and see that she is looked after. She has just had a horrible experience. I will follow in the other car with—the murderer."

"THEN YOUR suspicions were right all along?" Roger Temple said to the detective and his lawyer. "I can't believe it, I still can't believe it. He worked so sincerely, so hard to track down this girl—you mean he was playing a part the whole time?"

"Ah, no," Billot said. "That was genuine enough, his anxiety to discover her. It is just that his motive was slightly different than you imagined. He wanted her, not to save you, but to make sure of his own safety by getting rid of her."

"But he was safely in New York. He didn't have to come back here at—"

"He didn't have to, no, but his own guilty after thoughts forced him to. They all have them, those who kill. They are all lured back by their fears of something left undone that will betray them. And in the majority of cases, as in this, it is their seeking to remedy what was left undone, rather than what was left undone itself, that destroys them. They carry the seeds of their own destruction within them.

"How he must have fretted when he first read, in New York, of this girl who could save you! For he and he alone knew you had not done it. Your cablegram, or rather the one that Gregoire and myself advised you to send, was just the excuse he needed to come hurrying back and see to it that nothing had been left undone."

"You suspected him from the first, Billot?" Temple asked.

"No. Far less evidence pointed at him than at yourself. Say rather that I suspected you had not done it from the first, therefore, I had no choice but to fall back on the lesser evidence. You met him that afternoon before you went home. He was in a position to know what even you yourself did not know then, that madame would refuse to go out with you that night and the two of you would quarrel. And the only other thing was that there was a phial of tablets to guard against seasickness in her packed valise; she had thought she was taking a sea trip. You see how trivial, how inconclusive, such evidence is?

"I could not get my colleagues to believe in it. Yet it is on such flimsy things that we build our cases. He dropped in immediately after you left, probably let her know that she had just been a passing fancy and he was going without her. She became unmanageable, he attempted to leave again, to silence her, found he had killed her. Wound one of your neckties around her throat to point

suspicion at you, almost certainly set back the tiny hands of her shattered wristwatch after they had already stopped from the fall."

"And yet you say you didn't believe me guilty?" Temple repeated.

Billot smiled down at Roger Temple, smiled not as a detective of police, but as a very weary man.

"Do you know what convinced me of your innocence? The very fact that nearly cost you your life. Your complete inability to remember a single thing about this girl on whom so much depended. Only a man who was not guilty could have frustrated his own chances so thoroughly."

Temple smiled ruefully. "To tell you the truth, you have brought her here to me and I still don't recognize her."

"That much is understandable, at least. This is just a substitute whom we engaged to play the role of the real Gaby, in order to force your friend to betray himself. It was now or never. There was no more time to wait or hope for the original."

Temple crouched forward, ran his hands through his hair, shook his head. "There's probably a lesson in it, some place. Whatever it is, I can't make it out."

Billot shrugged, offered him another calming cigarette. "Me, I'm a detective, not a philosopher. The only moral is—those who kill, have to die."

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160 WEST 46th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036

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Please print **APRIL 1966**

Whirlwind of Blood

Animal, fiend, hate-crazed foe—who—or what—had crept into that silent room and clawed a sleeping man to his death in the night?

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

DURING THE winter, about five years ago, my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, endured a number of severe colds topped off by a bout of influenza. By the time April arrived, he looked peaked and worn. In addition, he had drifted into one of his periodic moods of mental depression.

I urged him to get away for at least a brief vacation, but he shook his head. Slumped in his favorite Morris chair, among his cherished Victorian antiques, he shrugged listlessly when I went on arguing my point.

"My place is here," he said. "I have been inactive all winter and my income has declined steadily. Who knows? Possibly a case will present itself."

I sighed with irritation.

"Even if it does," I said, "you won't take it unless it has unique features of interest. I have never known the profit motive to move you out of that Morris chair!"

Languidly, he reached for the brandy bottle and I knew there was no sense in further argument.

But I didn't give up. Several days later I ran into a friend who mentioned a small antique shop in Holly Ridge, New Hampshire. He had picked up some bargains, he said. I learned that the shop was beginning to become known for its choice collection of Victoriana.

It was the kind of cue I had been waiting for. The next day I was back at seven Autumn Street, stressing the advantages of Holly Ridge as a vacation site. The trip would be short; there was a fine inn; the weather would be splendid. And of course there was that

Featuring

LUCIUS LEFFING

wonderful antique shop bursting with bargains.

It took almost two weeks, but I won. Leffing finally consented to take a few days' vacation. His enthusiasm remained at a low ebb, however, and I foresaw that it would be difficult to hold him at Holly Ridge once he had thoroughly prowled the antique shop.

One sun-brilliant morning in May we tossed our bags into my battered Studebaker and started out. The drive was a pleasant one. I took my time and we stopped for an unhurried lunch. In spite of himself, Leffing began to slip out of his winter shell of weariness and gloom.

We arrived at the Mapledare Inn at Holly Ridge by mid-afternoon and were conducted to the two large airy rooms which I had reserved. After we had unpacked, Leffing lost no time in seeking out the location of the antique shop.

He smiled with anticipation as he glanced inside. "Tomorrow morning, Brennan, when I have the whole day ahead of me!"

After a roast duck dinner in the Quaker Room at the Mapledare, we sipped a few brandies, took a final evening turn and were ready for bed.

Leffing seemed content, though scarcely demonstrative.

I knew that the Mapledare did not skimp on breakfasts, so I persuaded Leffing to get up early. He enjoyed good food almost as much as I did, but he began to fidget before the meal was at an end.

"For heaven's sake, relax!" I told him. "That antique shop doesn't open till nine o'clock. You've forty minutes yet!"

When he left the inn, I felt convinced that I would not see him again till dinner time. If he became absorbed in an interesting case, an antique shop or an old book, the thought of lunch never entered his head.

I wrote a few post cards, did some perfunctory souvenir shopping, and strolled about. After lunch and a cat nap, I took a drive, came back and showered, bought papers and magazines and was sitting on the inn's screened veranda awaiting dinner when Leffing finally appeared. He carried a bulging shopping bag.

He nodded happily. "A frosted fern Pomona tumbler was worth the whole trip," he said. "And I picked up a pearl-ware epergne which is virtually unique!" Then he looked down with a somewhat startled air at the package-filled shopping bag. "Of course I had no business spending so much money!"

I laughed. "Well, no regrets! I'm sure your expedition has done you a world of good!"

As we sat on the veranda after dinner, I felt that the trip was a success. A bit of color was coming back into Leffing's face. His listlessness had disappeared; he

seemed more animated than he had in months. I congratulated myself.

We had scarcely got back to our rooms after breakfast the next morning when there came a knock at the hall door.

A breathless inn employee stood outside. "Is Mr. Leffing here, sir?"

I called Leffing and the young man waiting at the door addressed him. "Mr. Leffing, sir—Chief Merbickson would like to see you right away. He's waiting below."

Leffing's eyebrows lifted. "Chief Merbickson?"

The young man nodded. "Chief of police for Holly Ridge, sir. He—it's important!"

"Send the chief up at once," Leffing said.

I sighed. "Apparently your reputation has preceded you, Leffing. I trust you will turn down any involvements. Remember—you are on vacation!"

Leffing rubbed his hands together. "Well, well, Brennan, it can do no harm to listen to what Chief Merbickson has to say!"

A moment later the law officer entered. His face was flushed, his tie twisted, his hat askew.

After mutual introductions, he blurted out his story. "There's been a terrible murder here, Mr. Leffing—a horrible, bloody crime! We've never had anything like it in Holly Ridge before. I don't mind admitting we are way over our heads. I hope you will help us!"

I started to protest, but Leffing held up his hand. I could see a familiar glint in his eyes. "I will do whatever I can. Sit down and start at the beginning."

Chief Merbickson sat down heavily. A stocky, middle-aged man with greying hair and a round, florid face, he took a deep breath and began.

"Mr. Calhoun Cassman has been murdered! Found by his housekeeper, Mrs. Ridlington, early this morning. He lay in bed with his throat torn to ribbons! Blood everywhere! On the bedding, the carpet—even the walls! It was just like a whirlwind of blood!"

One glance at Leffing told me my cause was lost. I knew I could never persuade him to stay clear of the investigation.

"At what time was the body found?" he asked.

"Just after six. Mrs. Ridlington gets up there early to prepare Mr. Cassman's breakfast."

"He stayed alone during the night?"

"Yes, sir. He is—was—a semi-invalid, but he lived alone. Mrs. Ridlington did for him."

Leffing nodded. "What time do you think the murder occurred?"

Chief Merbickson rubbed his chin. "By the way the blood was soaked in and dried, I'd say a good many hours before Mrs. Ridlington found him. Seven, eight hours, maybe."

"At what time did Mrs. Ridlington leave yesterday?"

"She cleared up the dinner things, saw the old gentleman was set for the night and left about seven. She gets a seven-fifteen bus a few blocks away."

Leffing placed his fingertips together. "Did the dead man have any known enemies?"

Merbickson hesitated. "Well, not any real enemies here, that we know of. But he was pretty much disliked. Mean, tight-fisted and quarrelsome. Of course he seldom got outside in recent years, so I guess people here were beginning to forget about him."

"He is a native of this town?" Leffing asked.

The chief shook his head. "Oh, no! He came here when he retired from business about twelve years ago. We never learned much about his past, but he'd traveled a lot. Been in a lot of exotic-sounding places like Sumatra, Macao, Singapore. He was some kind of trader or speculator. I imagine he was a pretty tough businessman. Probably made plenty of enemies in other places!"

"Have you noticed any suspicious-looking strangers in town lately?"

Chief Merbickson shrugged. "Some early vacationists have come in, like you gentlemen. But I can't rightly say any of them looked suspicious."

Leffing stood up. "Well, well. We will have a look at things. I trust nothing has been disturbed?"

"Nothing, Mr. Leffing. I left strict orders."

We followed the chief downstairs to his car and ten minutes later pulled up in front of a big three-storied brownstone house set well back from the street in the middle of a sizeble tree-covered lot surrounded by a heavy iron fence. The whole place had a desolate, ragged, unkempt look about it.

We followed Chief Merbickson up a gravel path. A uniformed officer standing near the door nodded to us and we went in.

Trailing the chief across a dark entrance hall, we ascended a curved staircase. I had glimpses of ponderous dark furniture, heavy draperies and worn carpeting.

Down another dim hallway, Chief Merbickson opened a door, motioned toward a big mahogany bed and stood aside.

On the bed, half under the covers, lay the body of an old man, wax-grey, wrinkled and repellent. His head was thrust far back on a pillow, exposing a blood-caked throat which looked as if it had been torn and worried by a wild animal.

Blood had soaked into the pillow and the counterpane. Blood had been spattered on the carpet, on a nearby chair and side table, on the window curtain, on the walls. Glancing up, I even imag-

ined that I saw blood on the ceiling.

Chief Merbickson shook his head. "If you ask me, Mr. Leffing, it's the work of a maniac!"

Leffing remained silent, staring down at the gruesome spectacle. His eyes swept the room. "And the weapon, Chief?"

Merbickson shrugged. "Some kind of knife, I suppose."

"How do you account for all this blood scattered about?"

Chief Merbickson looked puzzled. "Well, the killer must have wielded the knife pretty furiously, been a struggle."

Without replying, Leffing began a systematic tour of the room, scrutinizing the carpet, the walls, the furniture, the windows and the door.

Actually, there was not much to inspect. Aside from the bed and its adjacent side table and chair, the furniture consisted of a reed rocker, a worn footstool, a small plastic clothes hamper and a big ugly-looking armoire set against one wall. Atop this massive cupboard stood a small electric fan. On the table there was an array of medicine bottles, tumblers, disposable handkerchiefs and so on.

Leffing circled the room, rummaged around inside the armoire and came back to the bed, looking anything but elated. "Mrs. Ridlington has given you no leads at all?"

"She did have a piece of information," Chief Merbickson replied with a guilty air, as if uncomfortably conscious of his tardiness in reporting it. "She told us that one night last week she heard a sound outside, like somebody walking through the shrubbery. She said she went to the window and thought she saw a shadowy form running toward the fence.

"It looked like a large man, she said, and she saw something he carried in his hand shine as he dodged through a patch of moonlight. It could be our killer, all right, but she couldn't describe him in any detail and nobody else has seen anyone who looked suspicious."

Merbickson paused and then leaned forward with a confidential air. "If you ask me, Mr. Leffing, I think the killer was someone out of Mr. Casswell's past! Someone who nursed hatred for a long time and finally caught up with him! He was probably getting the lay of the land, as it were, when Mrs. Ridlington scared him off. But he must have watched until he learned her routine and then, last night, he crept back after she had left!"

"How do you account for the fact that such a person has not even been glimpsed in Holly Ridge?"

The chief spread his hands. "He may look much like the rest of us in the daylight with his hate masked over. Unless he's a Chinamen from Macao or Singapore! Then he'd have to hide sure!"

Leffing prowled the room again with a restless air. "You have of course given instructions that any suspicious stranger be detained on sight?"

Merbickson nodded. "Yes, sir. I told my men not to be afraid of hurting anybody's feelings. If a few vacationists don't come back next year, I guess we'll survive!"

"I have no doubt," commented Leffing absently. He poked about the medicine table.

"Was Mr. Cassman given any narcotics?"

"I believe he took sleeping pills every night. But only as many as his doctor allowed."

"I see. One other thing. Who besides Mrs. Ridlington had access to this house—legitimate access, that is?"

"Mrs. Ridlington did most of the work, but a girl, Mary Streeler, came in two or three times a week to help with some of the heavier chores. Mrs. Ridlington is getting along in years, you know. But Mary Streeler wasn't here yesterday. Aside from her, the only other person who came here was Doctor Manning. Casswell had no relatives we know of. Not any friends either!"

Leffing turned to me. "Have you any theories?"

"I'd say the killer cased the house carefully and then broke in somehow after Mrs. Ridlington had left for the day. He may have hidden himself in that big armoire until old Mr. Casswell fell asleep. I notice that the armoire is half empty and that the clothes hanging in there would help conceal him. When Casswell was fast asleep, the killer stole out and mangled his throat in a berserk frenzy of hate, probably revenge for some dark deed of the past. The killer's savage fury would account for all the blood spattered about."

Leffing stood musing a moment. "Well, well, Brennan, you may be on the track." He walked to the window. "Have the grounds been inspected?" he asked Chief Merbickson.

"We haven't exactly gone over the grounds with a fine comb, Mr. Leffing, but I told my men to take a look outside and report anything that might offer a clue."

Leffing turned. "Well, we will have a look for ourselves."

I was glad to get out of that blood-emblazoned, melancholy room of death.

The grounds were overgrown with maple trees, hemlock and juniper bushes. Grass had been scythed away around the house but elsewhere it was knee high.

Apparently all efforts at systematic landscaping had been abandoned. A high rusty iron fence enclosed the entire lot, somewhat less than half an acre. A small gate at the rear, all but hidden by bushes, appeared to be rusted shut.

Leffing prowled about for forty minutes, more or less, without finding anything in the nature of a clue, so far as I could determine. Both Chief Merbickson and myself were relieved when he finally announced that he was finished.

After arranging for an interview with Mrs. Ridlington later in the day, Leffing declined a ride to the Inn and we started to walk back. The body of Casswell was to be taken to the county morgue for an autopsy, although the cause of death certainly seemed obvious enough.

As we strode along, Leffing seemed preoccupied and had few comments. Sprawled in a chair at the inn, he sat studying the ceiling, responding to my remarks, if at all, with a kind of subdued grunt.

At lunch time he had not moved out of his chair and I dined alone. Just after two o'clock he finally roused himself. We were to meet Chief Merbickson at Mrs. Ridlington's rooms at two-thirty.

Mrs. Ridlington lived in a modest but genteel boarding-house on the edge of town. Her quarters—a small living room, an alcove bedroom and a tiny kitchenette—were neat enough but conducive to claustrophobia. Mrs. Ridlington was the type of person about whom it used to be said 'there was no nonsense about.' Black hair, turning grey, was pulled back severely from an unsmiling poker face. Brown alert eyes coolly appraised Leffing and myself.

She repeated what Chief Merbickson had already told us and seemed unable to add further details. She finally recollected that once, several years before, old Mr. Casswell, after receiving a letter, had muttered something about "that fiend from Singapore." She had no idea whom he referred to, however, and he had never mentioned the matter again. He had burned the letter.

Leffing asked a number of questions which seemed to me of a purely routine nature. He then thanked her for her cooperation and we departed.

After leaving Chief Merbickson, we decided on a walk before dinner. Leffing remained preoccupied and by no means talkative.

"If the trail leads toward Singapore," I ventured at length, "you must eliminate me completely from the chase."

"Even if the killer came from Singapore," Leffing replied, "we cannot by any means assume that he would return there. More likely he would head for one of the big cities nearby—Boston, New York, Philadelphia—where he could lose himself."

I sensed that he was not in a mood for questions.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Leffing slumped in his chair with his eyes closed most of the evening. It was impossible to tell for sure whether he was engrossed in deep thought or sunk in deep slumber. I guessed the former, because his angular face looked more tense than relaxed.

At breakfast he remained uncommunicative and returned afterward to slump in his chair. I stood it as long as I could and then dug out a road map.

New Hampshire scenery, if not spectacular, is infinitely rewarding. I drove leisurely, stopped frequently to admire the view, bought lunch at a village diner and returned to Holly Ridge about the middle of the afternoon.

As I walked down the hallway toward our rooms, a plain-looking young girl hurried past. She gave me a startled glance of apprehension and almost ran the remaining length of the corridor. "Acts like a scared rabbit!" I thought to myself.

As soon as I entered our quarters, I sensed that Leffing was hot on the trail. He was no longer slumped in a chair, as I had feared. Instead he stood by the window with a restless air of nervous animation.

"Well, Brennan, how was the drive?"

"Splendid! You should have come along!"

"I have been busy! The case is solved!"

I sat down sulkily, feeling that I had been cheated. "Why is it," I asked bitterly, "that you always wait until I am absent to resolve a case?"

"My dear Brennan," he replied with sincerity, "your chance absence had nothing to do with it! My prolonged cogitations, which must have been wearying to you indeed, finally brought a glimmer of light. I went over the Cassman house and grounds again, persuaded Mary Streeler to stop here for a brief interview and found that my hypothesis was the correct one."

"Who in blazes is Mary Streeler?" I asked irritably, still not mollified.

"The girl who worked part time a few days a week in the Cassman house. You will recall that Chief Merbickson mentioned her."

I nodded, annoyed at myself that I had forgotten the name. "Was that the girl I passed in the hall? She acted like a frightened rabbit."

"That was the girl. She has given me invaluable information."

"You have the killer then?"

"Not yet under arrest. But I think there is no need of hurry."

"No need of hurry? With a butcher like that on the loose?"

Leffing shook his head. "I do not believe the killer will strike again. In fact, I am almost sure of it."

I sighed. "As usual, I am hung up in a web of mystery and confusion. How, then, did your 'cogitations' proceed? I am all ears!"

Leffing sat down and stretched out his long legs. "Of course I could not entirely eliminate the possibility that sometime in the past Cassman had made a deadly enemy who finally came to square accounts. But such a person would have difficulty lurking about in a small town like Holly Ridge without coming under suspicion.

"If Mrs. Ridlington's story about the prowler was not the result of imagination, then the killer was here, roaming about, over a week before the crime was committed. If there was 'a fiend from Singapore' present, he must have been virtually invisible, I concluded.

"Discarding the enemy-out-of-the-past theory, I sought fresh ground. Perhaps the killer was a native. But Cassman had lived as a recluse and semi-invalid for years. Aside from plumbing emergencies or something of that sort, only three people had access to his house: Mrs. Ridlington, Mary Streeler and his own doctor. It seemed highly improbable that any of these would savagely tear the old man's throat to shreds!

"Perhaps, I reasoned, Casswell had made a bitter enemy in Holly Ridge shortly after he came here—an enemy who brooded and thirsted for revenge. But Chief Merbickson, who knows all the gossip in town, could not even suggest such a person, nor could anyone else.

"There was nothing for it but to go over all the ground again and hope that I had missed some vital clue the first time.

"I searched the bedroom inch by inch, top to bottom. Remembering your theory that the killer had secreted himself in the armoire, I scrutinized the floor of that cupboard very carefully for bits of dirt, twigs, leaf-mould and so forth. There were none. Nothing but undisturbed dust. I then stood on a chair and inspected the top of the armoire. Again nothing but a layer of dust. However as I lifted the small electric fan which stood on the armoire, I was struck by a very singular fact. *The dust under the base of the fan was of the same depth and consistency as the dust on the rest of the armoire top!*"

I frowned. "All that indicates to me is that Mrs. Ridlington was not exactly a tiptop housekeeper!"

"Oh, come, Brennan!" Leffing burst out impatiently. "Surely you see the significance! If the electric fan's customary place was the armoire top, the dust layer underneath the base would be considerably thinner than the dust on the surrounding area. The fact that the dust was everywhere the same proved to me that the fan had recently been set on the armoire, that its customary place was elsewhere."

"Of course. You must forgive

my sluggish mental processes, Leffing! But, nevertheless, I fail to see the significance of the apparent fact that the fan had been moved."

"At first," Leffing admitted, "I myself had only a wild conjecture. I explored the rest of the room and found nothing further worth noting. I then inspected the entire inside of the house without result.

"Finally I looked outside again. I noted only one fact which had escaped me previously. The small gate at the rear of the lot is not actually rusted tightly shut, as it appears to be. A person of average strength can shove it aside far enough for ingress—or egress. After I had inspected it very carefully, along with the slate slab underneath, I concluded, in fact, that the gate had quite lately been pushed open."

I shrugged. "The murderer, no doubt, found it more convenient to push open a rusty gate than to climb over a high iron fence."

Ignoring my comment, Leffing continued. "A bizarre but fascinating hypothesis began to form in my mind. I telephoned Chief Merbickson and arranged for the part-time house maid, Mary Streeler, to come to our rooms here at the inn. She seemed scared and at first refused to talk. I finally induced her to tell what she knew concerning the relationship between old Mr. Cassman and Mrs. Ridlington."

"Great heavens, Leffing! You are not implying that that Puritan-like old lady—"

He went on, imperturably. "Mr. Cassman had, at some time in the past, willed Mrs. Ridlington a sizable sum of money. As his age and illness increased, however, he became, as Mary Streeler said, a sulky old devil. Nothing Mrs. Ridlington did could satisfy him. He complained by the hour. Within recent weeks he began to threaten Mrs. Ridlington that unless her services improved he would cut her off without a penny."

I stared at him. "You believe, then, that Mrs. Ridlington hired someone to mangle the old man's throat before he could change his will?"

Leffing shook his head. "No, Brennan. She hired no one. She mangled his throat herself!"

"Unbelievable!"

"But true, nevertheless."

"How did she do it? What was the weapon?"

"I have already mentioned the weapon."

"Well, you will have to mention it again!" I said peevishly.

"The electric fan, of course!"

I looked at him in disbelief. "It is really too far-fetched! How could a small electric fan tear out a man's throat?"

"An old man's throat," Leffing pointed out, "is apt to be quite, well, fragile, you might say. The skin will be thin and soft, the muscles wasted, the blood vessels brittle and close to the surface. The electric fan, moreover, while small, was quite powerful.

"When I noticed that its protective grill was loose and lifted off easily, I felt that I was on the right track. I have no doubt that a careful test will reveal traces of blood, even though the fan must have been meticulously wiped off, or perhaps washed off, after the killing."

"The fan, then, would account for all the blood spattered about?"

"Exactly. The actual weapon employed in the murder puzzled me from the beginning. I did not see how a knife could fling blood about in such a fashion, not even if it were wielded by a lunatic. When I concentrated my attention on the fan, the explanation came to me. I presume the fan was customary kept on the small side table near Mr. Cassman's bed."

"I still don't quite see how the crime was committed," I said unconvinced.

Leffing hooked his long fingers behind his head. "I will describe the murder as I believe it occurred. Final verification on all points will have to come later, of course.

"Fearful that Mr. Cassman would indeed change his will and leave her nothing, Mrs. Ridlington decided to kill him. As she was casting about for a method, the electric fan must have caught her attention. Probably she noticed that the protective grill was quite loose and could easily be pulled off. The fan rested on a table near Mr. Cassman's bed, only a few feet from his throat. Mrs. Ridlington saw her solution.

"It is probable that on the evening of the murder she introduced an extra sleeping tablet or two into the old man's dinner. After straightening up on that fateful evening, she left at her customary time, about seven, caught her usual bus and went home. But she did not stay there. After dark, perhaps muffled in a scarf or shawl, she walked swiftly back to the Cassman house. Slipping unobtrusively through the little-used rear gate which she knew could be opened with a bit of pressure, she let herself in the back door with her key and very quietly stole upstairs.

"The old man, meanwhile, after a meal and several extra sleeping tablets, had slipped into a deep slumber, completely unaware of the shrouded figure of death which hurried toward him! Mrs. Ridlington looked into the bedroom, saw that her victim was asleep and leaped into action. Lifting the grill

from the electric fan, she turned the fan on and thrust the powerful whirling blades against the old man's exposed and vulnerable throat.

"It was as if a hundred knives were suddenly slashing him. Perhaps he died at once without waking up. Or, unhappily, he may have opened his eyes for one last terror-stricken glimpse of his long-suffering housekeeper standing above him like a mad woman!

"Blood flew in every direction, but Mrs. Ridlington held the fan against his throat until it was obvious that life was extinct. Then she shut the fan off, cleaned it carefully—the exact method remains to be determined—dragged a chair over to the high armoire and set the murder weapon on top of that dusty cupboard. Whether this was planned or the result of a sudden impulse, we do not know.

"Possibly she reasoned that the fan would go unnoticed on top of the armoire, that the murder weapon would never be located. This would make it appear, of course, that the crime was committed by a stranger who carried away his killing instrument. The story about the letter, Cassman's comment about 'that fiend from Singapore', and the prowler glimpsed from the window were fabrications furnished by Mrs. Ridlington to throw us off the scent."

I shuddered as Leffing finished his graphic synopsis. "Your detailed account appears to clinch the case, but I still find it difficult to believe that a woman could commit such an atrocious and bloody deed!"

Leffing shrugged. "The world found it difficult to believe that Lizzie Borden could slaughter her father and step-mother with an axe but, in spite of her acquittal, I have no doubt that she did so!"

"But there are loose ends," I pointed out. "For instance, wouldn't Mrs. Ridlington's clothing be drenched with blood after the murder?"

"Undoubtedly her clothing would be pretty well splattered. But that was no great problem. The house was empty. Perhaps she stripped off her clothes and took a bath. No doubt she had other clothing about the house. The bloodied clothes may have been burned or thrown into a pond or gulley along the way as she returned home later."

He smiled a bit mischievously. "At the risk of appearing melodramatic, I might also suggest that Mrs. Ridlington may have stripped stark naked after entering the house. Perhaps she advanced on her victim without a stitch about her!"

As I recalled Mrs. Ridlington's severe, thin-lipped countenance, I found Leffing's suggesting wildly incongruous. "That I simply can't believe!"

Leffing laughed. "Come, come

—it would be the most practical way to go about the business—and Mrs. Ridlington struck me as being an eminently practical person!"

Mrs. Ridlington was arrested, but firmly maintained her innocence. Evidence supporting Leffing's conclusions accumulated, however. Minute traces of blood were found on the fan; a bundle of partially burned clothing found in Mrs. Ridlington's incinerator showed traces of blood; a check with Mr. Cassman's attorney in Boston revealed that the old man had written to him only days before his death indicating that he wished to make certain alterations in his will. The attorney had planned to call on the deceased during the week following the murder.

Mrs. Ridlington finally confessed, only to repudiate the confession at her trial, asserting that the old man's death was an accident. The grill had dropped off the fan, she explained, and in reaching to retrieve it, Cassman had leaned too close to the whirling blades, which had struck him in the throat, killing him instantly. Fearful that she would be blamed for the accident, she had attempted to make her employer's death look like murder committed by a blood-crazed prowler.

The jury refused to accept this explanation. Mrs. Ridlington received a life sentence which, in view of her age, will be quite literally that.

As we drove back toward New Haven, Leffing looked refreshed and content. His ordinarily cold grey-blue eyes twinkled a bit as he favored me with a crooked grin.

"Well, Brennan, it was a successful vacation! I have a frosted fern Pomona tumbler and you have some fresh notes for your little crime chronicles. What more could we ask?"

"That our bank accounts were not quite so depleted!" I said ruefully.

"Devil take the bank accounts!" he said cheerfully. "Stop round tomorrow evening and we will enjoy our poverty together—over a modicum of cask-mellowed cognac. What do you say?"

I grinned. "Even an earthquake won't keep me away!"

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

Inside a home that once had been happy, a smiling little demon had come to live, run amok and spread hate and ruin in her wake. Before she could spoil two lives, Amelia knew that her mad, bad stepchild must die. How? It was really quite simple. For she had 500 murderous queens to do her will, and —

The Comb of Death

by RICHARD DEMING

AMELIA CARTER was thirty-five before she ever had time for love. As an undergraduate at M.I.T. she had to work nights as a telephone operator, while other coeds attended proms. While working on her masters and her doctor of science, she was too dedicated to her studies to waste any time in social frivolity.

After she took her doctorate in biology, with a major in entomology, her teaching schedule left her evenings and weekends free, but research held more glamor for her than men. She spent all her free time in the biology lab.

She had never been a dedicated teacher. She entered the field solely because she had to eat while pursuing her real love, research. When she finally gained enough of a reputation in her field to apply for and get a foundation grant, she retired from teaching permanently. Theoretically she was merely on indefinite leave of absence from the school of Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she was a full professor until her research project was completed.

But she knew she would never go back to teaching. With her reputation now firmly established as one of the world's top entomologists, one foundation after another was certain to grant her research funds as soon as she finished one project and was ready to apply herself to another.

She could have used the laboratory facilities at M.I.T., but she pre-

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ferred the privacy of her own. She bought an old eight-room house in Cambridge, converted a huge back bedroom to a biology lab and furnished the rest of it with gay modern furniture.

She hired a combination housekeeper-cook to come in daily, except Sundays, so that household chores wouldn't interfere with her work. The woman was a cheerful and exceptionally efficient widow in her mid-fifties named Bridget Murphy.

Where previously Amelia's teaching schedule had limited her independent research to nights and weekends, she now could spend all day in her lab. Since she usually entered it early in the morning, even after ten to twelve-hour days she found herself confronted by long free evenings.

They began to drag. For the first time in her life Amelia found time to be bored. Taking a good look at herself, she was dismayed to realize she was rapidly approaching middle-aged spinsterhood.

Amelia wasn't against men. She just never had been able to spare time for them. Now she realized that if she didn't find one soon, she would be condemned to lonely evenings for the rest of her life.

At thirty-five she was still attractive enough to catch a man, she thought, after carefully examining herself in a mirror. Her figure was still slim and nicely curved, her features were regular, her complexion good, her brown hair healthily glossy and without a trace of gray.

Her clothes were awful, though, she realized. She had fallen in the habit of dressing more for comfort than appearance. While neat enough, she was about as stylish as a Mennonite in Paris.

Amelia attacked the project of acquiring a husband with the same logical methods she used in the laboratory, taking one problem at a time. The first problem was to glamorize herself. She made a thorough study of fashion magazines, then went out and bought a whole new wardrobe.

Afterward, clad in one of her new outfits, she made an appointment at Cambridge's most exclusive beauty salon and allowed an effeminate young man named Maurice to use his own judgment in styling her hair and demonstrating how she should make up her face.

The result so astounded her, she made a regular weekly appointment.

The next problem was to meet some eligible men. She had too much pride to join unmarried-adult clubs or registering with a matrimonial agency. She spent a whole evening analyzing what sort of socially accepted community activity she could involve herself in which would bring her in contact with the greatest number of unattached males.

She thought of and discarded various welfare enterprises, because

more middle-aged housewives than bachelors seemed to volunteer for such organizations. She thought of the Little Theater, but that not only could involve an amount of work which might interfere with her research. Also she had a feeling she would find more teen-agers than middle-aged single men in the environment, and she had no desire for romance with a man younger than herself.

She finally thought of the perfect hunting ground—church.

She had never been much of a church-goer, but she had attended enough churches to know that new visitors are almost invariably descended upon by some veteran member immediately after church, and automatically introduced to every member of the congregation in the immediate area. She reasoned that most congregations would have at least a few unattached males. And what more respectable place was there to meet a potential husband than in church?

She resolved to go about it in a scientific manner. Each Sunday from now on she would attend a different church, look over the congregation and try to get herself introduced to any attractive man who was interesting enough, and who proved to be eligible. She would become a regular attendant of that particular church until either something developed, or it seemed evident he was uninterested in marriage.

It might develop into a long campaign, she realized. It would take months to cover every church in Cambridge with any degree of thoroughness, since she would be limited to one each week. If she found nothing in Cambridge, it would take more months to cover Boston and its surrounding suburbs.

The thought didn't discourage her. She often spent months on a research project, trying one fruitless experiment after another before finally hitting the right one, and she had developed the habit of patience. After thirty-five years without a man, another whole year as a spinster wouldn't be tragic.

She had every confidence of success in the end.

It was seven months before Amelia finally found a satisfactory candidate. In the interim she had met several who showed some interest, because with her stylish new wardrobe and regular beauty treatments, she was really quite an attractive woman.

But on better acquaintance all had proved lacking of the qualities she wanted in a husband. She was too realistic to expect a Prince Charming at her age, but she was discriminating enough to insist on a man with at least some education and personality, and one she could respect.

She had covered every church in Cambridge and had branched out to Boston when she finally met him at the Unitarian Church there. His

name was Robert Maytum. He was tall, lean and distinguished looking, with a pleasantly reserved manner and an attractive touch of gray in the sideburns of his wavy black hair.

Amelia spotted him on her first visit to church and took a seat on the aisle a few rows behind him, where he would have to pass on his way out.

As usual she was approached the moment the service ended. This time it was a young married couple who introduced themselves as Betty and Albert Campbell. As soon as she announced her name, they began introducing her to everyone in the immediate area. One of the introductions was to Robert Maytum.

He only smiled politely until he heard her name, but then he looked interested. "Is that Dr. Amelia Carter from M.I.T.?" he asked.

"Formerly of M.I.T.," she said. "I'm now doing independent research."

"Well, well. It's certainly a pleasure to meet a scientist of your stature."

He stood chatting for a few moments, inquiring about her work, then moved on with a pleasant good-by.

Amelia said to Betty Campbell, "What a charming man. Who is he?"

Albert Campbell answered for his wife. "He sells stocks and bonds for the Sloan and Harding Investment Company here in Boston."

"She means *who* is he, not what is he," Betty Campbell said. "He's forty years old, a Harvard graduate and has been divorced about ten years. Let's see—Virginia must have been about two at the time, so she'd be about twelve now. That's his daughter. The mother must have custody, because I haven't seen the child since they broke up. Alice remarried and now lives in Connecticut, I believe. She married quite a wealthy man."

Albert Campbell said, "Bob's quite active in the church. He's on the board and is chairman of our adult education program. That's a program of evening discussions on matters of current interest, new books, music and what have you."

Amelia had all the information she needed for the moment, and she didn't want to exhibit undue interest. She changed the subject by asking for an introduction to the minister.

The following Sunday she deliberately avoided Robert Maytum and, after church, attached herself to an elderly widow she had met the week before. From her she learned that the adult education group met at the church each Wednesday at eight P.M., and the discussions were open to anyone who wished to attend.

That was lucky, she thought. Wednesday was also the day she had her weekly beauty appointment.

Amelia attended three adult edu-

cation sessions before Maytum suggested, as the third meeting was breaking up, that they have a drink together somewhere before going home.

He drove her to a quiet bar in downtown Boston. They spent a pleasant hour over a couple of drinks, and she began to like him more all the time. Their talk never bordered on the personal, but he did drop one compliment.

"It's amazing that you're a research scientist, Miss Carter," he said. "You're such a completely feminine person."

She smiled at him. "Thank you. I believe in being a woman first and an entomologist second."

Although she was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he was the most attractive man she had ever met, and sensed that he was finding her equally attractive, she was more relieved than impatient at the slow pace at which things were moving. She didn't really want to be swept off her feet.

She preferred time to look over a prospective husband thoroughly before taking the final step, because she was resolved to have a lasting marriage.

Robert Maytum gave her plenty of time, moving with a caution fitting the conservative investment house he worked for. Although Amelia joined the church and regularly attended adult education sessions, they had no formal date for another month. He did invite her for a drink at the same quiet bar after each Wednesday night session, however.

By the third time they had drinks together, they were on a first-name basis. The fourth time he asked her to have dinner with him the coming Friday.

It was another two months, by which time they were regularly seeing each other every Friday and Saturday and were sitting together in church, before he asked her to marry him. He brought the matter up rather obliquely over one of their Wednesday night drinks.

Although they had traded information about their past lives by now, Maytum had never discussed his marriage beyond mentioning that he was divorced and had a twelve-year-old daughter. But now, as a sort of prelude to his proposal, he went into it in detail.

"I want to ask you something Amelia," he said. "But first I think it only fair you should know some things about my first marriage."

The adjective "first" told Amelia what he intended to ask, and her heart started to hammer.

"You don't have to, Bob, unless you really want to," she said. "Your life before we met is really none of my business. Of course if you really want me to know, I'll be glad to listen."

"I want you to know," he said. "It was Alice who left me, not I who left her. She had higher hopes for me than I was able to achieve.

We were married shortly after I graduated from Harvard, the moment I got a job with Sloan and Harding. She visualized my working my way up to president of the company within a few years, and I let her down.

I have quite an adequate income, and had even when we broke up, but when she realized I was never going to be anything but a stock and bond salesman on commission, she looked around, found a wealthy man, divorced me and married him."

Amelia was too intelligent to make any disparaging comments about a former wife, even though this one sounded as though she deserved some.

She merely said, "I'm sorry you had such a bad time."

"Oh, she did me a favor by leaving me. By then I had come to realize what a vain, self-centered person she was. But we had a two-year old daughter whom I loved very dearly. Alice insisted on full custody, with my right to have her limited to two weeks every summer. I do have weekly visiting rights, but Virginia is always so far away that they're meaningless.

"It wasn't because Alice is so crazy about the child that she insisted on this arrangement. It wasn't even vindictiveness. She had nothing to be vindictive about, since it was she who left me and we still have a more or less friendly relationship. It was simply her way of demonstrating to the world that she's a loving mother."

"I don't think I understand that," Amelia said.

"I'll explain it. Alice is so vain and self-centered that her public image is very important to her. She couldn't grant custody to me, or even let me share the child, because it is absolutely necessary to her ego to be regarded as a loving mother. Yet she doesn't like children at all. She really hates to have Virginia around her. I think she would actually be relieved if the child took sick and died."

Amelia said in a shocked voice, "You can't be serious."

"That's probably an exaggeration," Maytum admitted. "I don't suppose she would actively wish anything bad to happen to the child, but I'm sure she secretly regards her as an inconvenience. See what you think when I explain how she has used her exclusive custory. Winters Alice spends partly in Florida, partly at an apartment she and her husband maintain in New York, while Virginia attends a private girl's school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Summers, when she isn't traveling in Europe, Alice spends on a farm her husband owns in Connecticut. Virginia spends all except three weeks of the summer at a camp in Maine, and spends two of the remaining three weeks with me.

"Alice sees her three times a year. She picks her up at school each fall and runs her to camp.

When she leaves me each summer, Virginia spends a week at the farm with her mother before returning to school. During Christmas vacation Virginia flies to New York City to spend another week. On those three occasions Alice showers her with gifts and an extremely phony show of affection."

"The poor child!" Amelia said with sincere sympathy.

"About a month ago Alice's husband, whose name is Arthur Winston, incidentally, and who is a vice president of one of the biggest steel companies in America, was told he was being sent to France to manage a new plant there. I learned this from Alice herself, who still occasionally drops me a line, even after all these years. He'll be over there five years, and naturally Alice plans to go with him. I saw it as an excellent chance for me to get custody of Virginia, and at the same time as an excellent out for Alice.

"I wrote her back suggesting that for the child's own good, she should be allowed to finish her schooling in America. I appealed to her vanity by saying I knew it was a lot to ask of a mother to sacrifice having her child at her side, but the test of true motherhood was unselfishness. I know that must sound a little thick, but I had to give her some excuse to relay to her circle of acquaintances in France which would reflect favorably on her as a devoted mother. I asked if she would like to

leave Virginia in my care while she was away. I added that she would have a normal home life, because I plan to remarry soon."

"Do you?" Amelia asked with raised brows.

"That's what I'm leading up to. Alice has agreed to let me have Virginia. Would you like to become the stepmother of a twelve-year-old girl?"

Amelia smiled, a trifle ruefully. "I have no objection to becoming a stepmother, Bob. I'm quite sure I would love any child of yours. But if that's a proposal, it lacks something. It sounds more like an ad for a housekeeper."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I merely wanted you to know about Virginia before I asked you, instead of breaking the news to you after you said yes. If you do say yes, that is. I'm not asking you merely because I need a mother for my daughter. I'm asking you because I love you. Will you marry me?"

"That's better," she said, soften-

ing her smile and reaching across the table to take his hands in hers. "Of course I'll marry you. I've been in love with you since the first night we came here."

From the time she had first examined herself in the mirror to decide what chance she had of catching a man, it had taken Amelia eleven and a half months to catch one, and she had now turned thirty-six. She didn't regret a minute of it.

They were married a week and a half later on Saturday, May fourteenth. Amelia had just completed her research project, a study of control methods for the Tennessee tick, so from the standpoint of her work, it was an ideal time for a honeymoon. They spent two weeks on a tour of Canada.

Maytum gave up his bachelor apartment in Boston when they returned from their honeymoon and moved into Amelia's house in Cambridge. They kept Bridget Murphy on as housekeeper and cook, as Amelia had no intention of retiring as a research scientist and becoming merely a housewife.

During the two weeks before Virginia came to live with them, they settled into the routine of married life. Amelia had received another foundation grant and was now busily making war on the corn borer. While she was in her laboratory days, her husband was at his office in Boston.

When he returned home evenings, the house was always immaculate, courtesy of Mrs. Murphy, and dinner was in the oven. Amelia, freshly showered and in a pretty dress, met him at the door with a kiss and a cold cocktail. He quite obviously was supremely happy with this marriage, and so was she.

She sometimes regretted the lost years she might have enjoyed such marital bliss in the past, but she wasn't given to brooding over what might have been. She mostly regretted that she couldn't give her husband a child. While she was still physically capable of conceiving, both had sensibly agreed that they were too old to start a family now, since Maytum would be in his sixties and Amelia in her late fifties before a child finished college, even if they had one at once.

Anyhow she told herself, they would soon have his child in the home. Amelia resolved to be as loving a mother as though Virginia were her own.

Maytum flew to Ann Arbor on Saturday, June eleventh, and flew back with Virginia on the twelfth. Amelia met them at the airport.

The child was thin and not very tall for twelve. She wasn't very pretty either. She had a thin face with too-large features, straight, lifeless hair and wore dental braces.

While she was a little disappointed at her new stepdaughter's appearance, it didn't lessen her resolve to give the child all the maternal love she was capable of. She bent to kiss her on the cheek.

Virginia hardly noticed the caress. She was too eager to tell Amelia about the plane ride.

"They had movies on the plane," she said. "Of course this isn't the first time I've seen movies on a plane. I fly all by myself to New York City and back again every Christmas to see my mother. My mother's going to Europe for five years and Daddy says I'm to live with him now, so I guess I won't be doing that any more. This movie was called *Stagecoach* and was about—"

"Whoa, chatterbox," her father said indulgently. "I saw the movie too, and don't care to sit through it again. You stay here with Amelia while I get our luggage."

He moved off, leaving Amelia alone with the child. Amelia smiled at her and tried to think of something to say.

She needn't have bothered, because there was no conversational lapse.

Virginia said, "On the plane Daddy asked me what I wanted to call you. He said I could decide. I already have a real mother, so I can't call you that. I'm going to call you Amelia."

"All right," Amelia agreed.

"I just finished fifth grade," Virginia announced.

Amelia was a little startled. At that rate she would be fifteen by the time she graduated from grammar school, she thought. She wondered if the child were backward.

Virginia answered the unspoken question.

"I'm two years behind normal," she said with a strange sort of pride. 'It's not that I'm not bright. I have an I.Q. of one hundred-twenty-seven, which is quite good. Anything above one hundred twenty is regarded as intelligent. My problem is I don't pay attention. I'm always looking out the window and dreaming while the teacher is talking. I talk a lot in class too, when we're supposed to be studying, which makes the teachers mad. They don't like me at all. Mother had to talk like sixty to get them to take me back this year."

At least the child was frank about her shortcomings, Amelia thought. She said, "We'll just have to straighten you out so you pay more attention and talk less, I guess."

"Oh, I doubt that you can do that," Virginia said matter-of-factly. "My school counselor told Mother I need psychiatric aid. It all stems back to my parents' divorce. Subconsciously I feel rejected, and I compensate by always wanting to be the center of attention. People dislike me because I show off. Almost nobody likes me. You don't, do you?"

The poor child, Amelia thought, inwardly cursing the school counselor who had attempted a little amateur psychiatry by pumping such bilge into her impressionable mind. She probably was merely starved for affection.

Kneeling, she pulled Virginia to her. "Of course I like you, honey. I'm going to love you as though I'm your second mother. And I hope you learn to love me too."

Virginia deftly disengaged herself. "Do you and Daddy have a big house?" she asked. "Mother and Mr. Winston have a twelve-room farmhouse in Connecticut, a beach home in Florida and an eight-room apartment in New York City."

Amelia straightened from her kneeling position. It was going to be difficult to get close to the child, she thought. Her mind shot off in too many directions.

She started to say they had a house with adequate room, but Virginia didn't let her get a word out.

"This movie we saw on the plane —" She abruptly switched tack when she spotted her father approaching. "Here comes Daddy. That white suitcase is mine. It doesn't contain all my clothes, of course. I have closets full. Daddy shipped them by express, because there's a weight limit on the plane."

Maytum came up carrying a white airplane suitcase in one hand and his overnight bag in the other.

"All set," he said. "You two beginning to get acquainted?"

"Oh yes," Amelia said. We're already old friends."

She didn't feel as cheerful as she sounded. Despite herself, she couldn't as yet warm to her husband's child. Perhaps it was because she sensed that, so far, Virginia really hadn't the slightest interest in her, except as an audience. She would have to win the girl's love, she decided. Then perhaps she could begin to feel return love herself.

But from the very beginning things didn't turn out anything like Amelia had visualized. She had rosily contemplated showering her husband's daughter with maternal love and having the child respond with equal love. To Amelia's dismay she found that the better she got to know the child, the more she disliked her.

The school counselor's diagnosis of the underlying cause for Virginia's behavior may have been amateur psychiatry, but he had hit the nail on the head in describing the symptoms. She was a show-off, she talked too much, and she was absolutely incorrigible. It was easy for Amelia to see why no one liked her.

Virginia didn't act rebellious, or throw tantrums, or even talk back. Her incorrigibility took a much more insidious turn. She never refused to obey. She merely cheerfully ignored orders.

Their first morning alone together, Maytum had barely left the house when Virginia picked up from the top of the bookcase the porceline figure of a Japanese girl which Amelia was particularly fond of.

"Be careful of that, please," Amelia said. "It's very fragile."

"Oh, I'm quite manually adept,"

Virginia said, tossing it into the air and catching it.

Swiftly Amelia crossed the room, took the figure from the girl's hand and set it back on the bookcase.

"That is not a plaything," she said in a definite tome. "It's an ornament. I don't want you to touch it again. Understand?"

"Well, gee whiz, I didn't hurt the old thing." Virginia said aggrievedly.

"You might have, and it's important to me. Now just leave it where it is."

She walked back into the kitchen to scrape the breakfast dishes and pile them in the sink for Mrs. Murphy to wash when she came. Thirty seconds later there was a smashing sound from the front room.

Quickly returning to the front room, Amelia stared in outrage at the broken fragments of the Japanese girl lying on the floor.

"It slipped," Virginia said defensively. "I was only looking at it."

"I told you not to touch it!" Amelia said with suppressed fury. "I couldn't have been more definite. I told you less than a minute ago, and you deliberately disobeyed."

"I didn't do it on purpose, Amelia," the child said. "I'm sorry."

Amelia could hardly beat the child. She settled for saying, "In the future, when I ask you not to do something, I expect you to mind. That way we'll get along a lot better. Understand?"

"All right," Virginia said pleasantly. "I'll pick it up. Where shall I throw the pieces?"

Mrs. Murphy came at nine. Ordinarily Amelia would have been in her laboratory a full hour by then, but she didn't want to leave Virginia wandering around the house alone. She waited until the housekeeper arrived and introduced her to Virginia.

Bridget Murphy was a large, buxom woman with a broad, cheerful smile. She said, "How do you do, young lady? We'll get along fine, because I like little girls."

Virginia said. "Are you the only servant here?"

Mrs. Murphy's smile faded. Amelia said firmly, "Mrs. Murphy is not a servant. She's our housekeeper and cook, and you are to mind her just as you mind me."

Virginia said, "My mother and Mr. Winston have a housekeeper and a maid and a gardener and two farm hands at the farm in Connecticut. They take the maid with them to the beachhouse in Florida and the apartment in New York.'

Mrs. Murphy's good humor returned.

"My, that's more places than I could clean all alone," she said with a grin. "Your mother and Mr. Winston must be rich."

"Mr. Winston is vice president of—"

"I have to get to work," Amelia interrupted. "It isn't necessary to explain your whole family back-

ground to Mrs. Murphy, Virginia. Why don't you go out and play, and see if you can meet some of the other kids in the neighborhood?"

"All right," Virginia said agreeably.

But she made no move to go outdoors. As Amelia walked down the hallway to her laboratory at the rear of the house, she heard the girl say, "My mother and Mr. Winston are going to France to live for five years. That's why I'm here. My mother and father were divorced when I was two, you see—"

Amelia shut the sound off by closing the lab door behind her.

Three minutes later the door opened and Virginia came in.

"You mustn't disturb me while I'm working, dear." Amelia said. "If you need anything, ask Mrs. Murphy."

"I won't be a bother," Virginia said. "I'll just stand quietly and watch."

She walked over to a work counter where eight Petri dishes lay in a neat row, lifted the lid of one and stuck her finger into the germ culture it contained.

Amelia grabbed her by the arm, hustled her over to the sink and held her finger under running water. Then she marched her to the door.

"You must not come in here again," she said in a definite tone. "Ever. This room is absolutely off-limits to you. And particularly you must never enter it when I'm not here. If you ever do, I'll have to ask your father to punish you severely."

"Well, gee whiz, I didn't mean anything," Virginia said. "I was just looking at that funny dish."

"That funny dish happened to have a germ culture in it," Amelia said. "By adding whatever germs you had on your finger to it, you've probably ruined part of an experiment. Now run out and play, and don't you dare bother me again."

She pushed the child out the door and closed it after her.

She would have to get a lock for the lab door, Amelia reflected. She didn't stock any dangerous poisons or explosives in the lab, so it was unlikely the child could hurt herself seriously in it, but she could ruin some experiment with her tampering.

Virginia didn't disturb her any

more that morning, but she nearly drove Mrs. Murphy crazy. When the housekeeper called Amelia to lunch, there was an indignant expression on her face.

She said, "You'll have to do something about that kid, Amelia."

"What's the matter, Mr. Murphy?"

It typified the New England concept of democrary that Amelia addressed the housekeeper as Mrs. Murphy, but the latter called her by her first name. The reason was simple. Bridget Murphy was twenty years older.

"She just plain doesn't mind anything at all," Mrs. Murphy said. "Not that she's a sassy child. She just pays no attention. She's into everything, and when you tell her to stop, she's right back into it again a minute later. And she keeps disturbing my work. She wanted me to come out front and watch her turn a somersault on the grass. I watched once, and five minutes later she wanted me to watch again. I told her I was busy. So what does she do? Three times she dragged me to the front door by ringing the bell, and all she wanted was for me to watch her again. The third time I told her if she did it again, I'd grab her and give her a good shaking."

"I'm sorry," Amelia said, distressed.

"That ain't all. When she's not in mischief, she follows me around and chatters about everything on earth. She's a regular phonograph. My poor ears are actually ringing."

"She's in a brand new environment," Amelia said. "She's never before had any home life. She'll adjust with a bit of patience."

"She'd better before mine runs out," Mrs. Murphy said grimly. "Or you'll be advertising for another housekeeper."

Amelia had a long talk with Virginia after lunch. She explained that Mrs. Murphy had work to do and couldn't be constantly disturbed.

Virginia listened with a serious expression on her face and agreed not to bother Mrs. Murphy any more.

At three Mrs. Murphy, who ordinarily never bothered her in the lab, knocked on the door. When Amelia opened it, the housekeeper announced she was going to quit.

Amelia took Virginia upstairs and had another long talk with her, this time bluntly informing her she intended to ask her father to take a strap to her if she didn't leave Mrs. Murphy alone.

Virginia promised she would.

When Amelia emerged from the lab at five to take a shower before her husband got home, Mrs. Murphy bitterly informed her that her second lecture had impressed Virginia no more than the first. The housekeeper was preparing dinner for that evening, she said, but she wouldn't be back tomorrow.

Amelia pointed out that in the fall Virginia would be in school, so

only during the sumer months would she be underfoot. If Mrs. Murphy would put up with her for the summer, Almelia offered to raise her pay.

The housekeeper finally agreed to stay on conditionally at a substantial raise in pay.

When Robert Maytum got home that evening, he was as usual greeted with a kiss and a waiting cocktail. Virginia was not in evidence.

"Where's Virginia?" her father asked.

"I sent her upstairs to her room so we could talk."

Holding her voice low, so that Mrs. Murphy in the kitchen couldn't overhear, Amelia recounted Virginia's misdeeds. Maytum listened with a frown on his face, then went upstairs to speak to his daughter, leaving his cocktail untouched.

When he returned, leaving Virginia upstairs, he was frowning even more deeply.

"I had hoped you and Virginia would hit it off," he said. "I didn't realize childish exuberance would get on your nerves so quickly."

"Childish exuberance!" she said in a high voice. "She simply refuses to obey. I told her not to touch that figure again, and she broke it less than a minute later. She walked in my lab and stuck her finger in a germ culture before I knew what she was doing. She drove Mrs. Murphy half crazy all day. As a matter of fact I had to raise her salary to get her to stay on. She—"

She let it trail off at the expression on her husband's face.

"She admits breaking the Japanese girl and she's sorry," he said. "After all, it was an accident. She admits disturbing your work for a minute, but she says she wasn't in the lab more than a minute, and now that she knows it's off-limits, she won't disturb you again. She's only twelve, Amelia. Can't you try to be a little more understanding?"

Amelia felt a touch of panic. She had been so confident that Virginia's arrival would weld the love between herself and her husband even more firmly. But after only one day, it had already driven a wedge between them.

She said defensively, "It isn't just my opinion, Bob. Mrs. Murphy was going to quit because of the way Virginia disturbed her work."

"It seems to me most of your complaints are relayed from Mrs. Murphy," he growled. "If we have a housekeeper who dislikes my daughter, let her quit, and good riddance."

The implication, though unsaid, was that a wife who disliked his daughter was replacable too. Amelia felt stark terror. Was this marriage which, up to now, had made her so sublimely happy, going to founder before it was even fully underway?

She said with a meekness which bordered almost on pleading, "I've never been around children before,

you know. Perhaps I could be more understanding. I do want to be a good mother to her, darling. And I want her to love me. Want to give me another chance?"

He went over and took her in his arms. "You two will adjust to each other, honey. I'm sure it will work out. You both just have to give a little."

Despite Amelia's assurance to Mrs. Murphy that Virginia would adjust in time, the girl showed no change. She was the most impossible child Amelia had ever encountered. She smilingly listened to orders, then instantly disobeyed them. And she broke nearly everything breakable she touched.

The thing hardest for Amelia to understand was that the child didn't seem to be in the least vicious. Her manner was always pleasant enough in a remote, unreachable way. Although she showed not the slightest spark of affection for either Amelia or Mrs. Murphy, she exhibited no dislike either. She seemed to like to be around both, but Amelia got the impression this was merely because she demanded a constant audience. Any other two persons would have satisfied her just as well.

Amelia came to the conclusion the child's trouble was that she was as totally self-centered as her mother. As she had candidly admitted at the airport, Virginia constantly required the center of the stage. Her sole interest seemed to be to have attention centered on herself at all times, and she didn't seem to care particularly whether the attention was approving or disapproving, so long as she got it.

Amelia began to suspect the child was psychotic.

Mrs. Murphy, trapped into staying on by her substantial raise and the knowledge that Virginia would be in school at summer's end, made no more threats about quitting. But her disposition steadily deteriotated under the influence of Virginia's infuriating behavior. She went about her chores grim-faced, snapping at the twelve-year-old almost constantly.

Robert Maytum seemed to be completely oblivious to his daughter's defects. He was so delighted at finally having custody of the child, he was blind to any inkling that the arrangement wasn't completely satisfactory. But another reason was that Virginia behaved a little better when her father was around. She constantly interrupted even him when she wanted attention, but he was the one person in the world whose orders she didn't ignore.

His attitude to Virginia's interruptions was indulgent. He gave her his immediate attention, no matter what the circumstances, even when they were entertaining company. Several times Amelia noted strained and rather wondering expressions on guests' faces when Virginia walked into the room, disrupted adult conversation, and they were

forced to listen to a childish monologue for as long as fifteen minutes.

Obviously Maytum thought his daughter was extremely cute, and it simply didn't register on him that his opinion wasn't universally shared.

The situation remained unchanged as time passed. Virginia continued to go serenely on her way, driving Mrs. Murphy to distraction, breaking things and ignoring both direct orders and ultimatums.

The day after the scene with her husband, Amelia had a lock installed on her laboratory door. She escaped witnessing most of the unceasing battle between Virginia and Mrs. Murphy by locking herself in her lab, emerging only for lunch and just before her husband came home.

Realizing she would quickly became as nerve-wracked as the housekeeper if she saw too much of Virginia, she developed the defense of simply ignoring the child. She stoically accepted the broken vases, lamps and other destroyed items Virginia left in her wake, not even bothering to report the breakage to her husband unless he inquired about some missed item.

Then she merely said briefly. "Mrs. Murphy said Virginia broke it," and left it to him to inquire into details with his daughter.

Virginia always had an alibi. Mrs. Murphy broke the vase dusting and blamed it on her. A passing jet caused a sonic boom which jarred the lamp from the table. A visiting child from down the street picked the painted dish off the shelf and dropped it.

To make it more plausible, Virginia readily admitted breaking something on occasion, and candidly offered as her only excuse that she had been clumsy. This evidence of her truthfulness convinced her father she was telling the truth in all cases.

He developed such a strong dislike for Mrs. Murphy, Amelia had to put her foot down hard to prevent him from firing her.

"She's been with me since I bought this house," she said. "We would never be able to replace her, and I have no intention of dropping my work and becoming a housewife. I'll see to it that she and Virginia get along hereafter."

Amelia started replacing broken items with new ones as close to the originals as she could find them, and stopped mentioning anything at all about Virginia to her husband.

Amelia wisely kept the key to her lab in her handbag and kept the handbag with her at all times. Less wisely she kept a spare key in her top dresser drawer.

Four weeks after Virginia's arrival Amelia returned home from one of her Wednesday afternoon beauty appointments to find Mrs. Murphy alone in the kitchen preparing dinner.

"Where's Virginia?" she asked.

"Haven't seen her since you left," the housekeeper said. "Haven't missed her either."

Amelia went upstairs to take off her hat. Her top dresser drawer was slightly open.

She jerked the dresser drawer the rest of the way open and probed

under her handkerchiefs. The extra key to her lab was missing.

She almost tripped and fell when she caught her heel running down the stairs, but grabbed at the bannister in time. She raced down the hill to her lab. The door was closed and a key was in the lock.

Twisting the key, she flung open the door. Virginia was at the sink, stirring something in a large beaker with a spatula.

Amelia stared at the counter containing the eight Perti dishes in which she had been cultivating eight separate strains of benign bacteria. At least one of them, she had hoped, would induce a fatal epidemic among corn borers. The dishes were all lidless and all eight of them were empty.

Virginia glanced over her shoulder and her eyes widened.

Amelia rushed at the child. The beaker dropped and shattered in the sink. Virginia darted away. Amelia grabbed for her, missed and fell against her work table, knocking a thousand-dollar microscope off the table onto the floor.

Virginia raced to the door, fled down the hall and upstairs. By the time Amelia got upstairs, she had locked herself in her room. Amelia's furious pounding brought no response.

Finally giving up, Amelia returned to the lab to access the damage. Miraculously the microscope seemed to be undamaged except for a chip of paint missing from its base. Nothing aside from the beaker was broken. The only real destruction was of about a month's work.

When Robert got home from work that night, there was neither a kiss nor a cocktail awaiting him. He was met by a grim-faced wife.

"The time has come for a showdown over Virginia," Amelia said without preamble. "I don't mind covering up for her ordinarily. But today while I was at the beauty parlor, she stole the spare key to my lab and did a terrible amount of damage."

Maytum frowned.

"This time I'm not merely repeating something Mrs. Murphy told me," Amelia said. "I caught her in the act. She deliberately destroyed

an entire experiment—weeks and weeks of work, not to mention causing a microscope to fall off the work table. Fortunately it wasn't damaged, but that isn't her fault."

"Where is she?" Maytum asked.

"Locked in her room. This time I don't want you to talk to her alone, Bob. I insist on being present so that she can't lie out of it."

Virginia came walking calmly down the stairs. She looked at her father and lowered her eyes.

"Well, young lady?" Maytum said ominously. "Is what Amelia says true?"

"I didn't hear what she said, Daddy. But if it was about going in the lab, yes, sir."

Amelia nodded.

"I didn't touch anything though," the child added quickly. "I know I shouldn't have even looked in, but I just wanted a look. I just stood inside the door and looked around. I didn't even go near anything."

Before Amelia could react to this bare-faced lie, her husband said sharply, "Don't lie, Virginia. Amelia says you spoiled an entire experiment and nearly broke a microscope."

"I didn't do it. She knocked over the glass jar full of stuff and the microscope herself. She looked so mad, I started to run. When she chased me, she knocked them both over with her elbows. It wasn't my fault. I was just standing there until she grabbed for me. I thought she was going to hit me, so I ran."

For a moment Amelia was speechless. Then she said in a high voice, "Bob, when I entered the lab, she had poured the contents of eight Petri dishes into a beaker and was stirring them together. She dropped and broke the beaker when I started for her."

Virginia said, "I did not. She knocked that glass thing over. The microscope too."

Maytum looked from his daughter to his wife.

"I did knock over the microscope," Amelia said. "She dodged away from me and I fell against the work table. But that isn't important. What's important—"

She stopped at the expression on her husband's face.

"You did run after her then?" he said quietly.

Amelia straightened her shoulders. "Do you believe me or her?" she demanded.

"She's admitted being in the lab," he said reasonably. "She's also admitted having no business there. On the other hand you've admitted it was you, not she, who knocked over the microscope. You didn't tell it that way the first time. I know you're upset about your spoiled experiment, but please don't blame the child if she isn't guilty. Of course she's indirectly responsible for being where she wasn't supposed to be. But do you want to think about just what actually happened a little more and tell me again?"

Amelia knew when she was de-

feated. She smiled from the teeth out. "I don't believe so, dear. Perhaps we had just better forget the whole incident. Hereafter I'll keep both keys with me."

The scene strained relations between Amelia and her husband for two days. At the end of that period she couldn't stand it any more. They had a heart-to-heart talk which ended with Amelia again promising to try to be more understanding.

During the talk Amelia was strongly impelled to make the discreet suggestion that perhaps Virginia could use psychiatric help, but she suppressed the urge because she knew it would bring on an even worse scene. She had come to the conclusion that her husband was not going to accept any criticism of his daughter at all.

Although the heart-to-heart talk had made her and her husband friends again, Amelia knew it was only a truce until the next incident. There was no doubt in her mind that eventually Virginia would destroy their marriage.

One of them was going to have to go, she decided. And it wasn't going to be Amelia.

It took her a little time to reach this decision, because she sensed that Virginia wasn't deliberately conducting a campaign to break up the marriage. It was just working out that way. Like her mother, whose insistence on full custory hadn't been vindictive, but merely selfish, Amelia suspected Virginia's behavior had no real viciousness behind it. The child was merely totally without feeling for anyone but herself. She probably would continue the same behavior pattern as long as she lived.

It was some days before Amelia got an idea as to how to solve her problem, although it was never far from her mind. For a time she was too busy resetting up her experiment to brood on it much. Then, one evening, in browsing through an entomological journal, she read of a unique problem facing the farmers of Brazil.

It was a problem right in her field. The next day she got off an airmail letter to a fellow entomologist in Rio de Janeiro.

It was the middle of August before she got a reply. It had been necessary to make detailed arrangements for the air travel of the specimens she had requested, the letter said, as it was wise to have the package in transit as little time as possible. Arrangements had now been completed and the package would arrive by air freight at Boston airport at ten A.M. on Saturday, August twentieth. The letter suggested Amelia be at the airport to receive it.

On Wednesday the seventeenth Amelia had her beauty appointment as usual. When she left the shop, she walked to the corner and deliberately tossed the key ring containing her door key and the two

keys to the lab into a storm drain.

When she got home, she discovered the loss in front of Mrs. Murphy. Also in front of Mrs. Murphy she phoned the beauty shop to inquire if the keys had been found there. Informed that they hadn't been, she left the house again and visited the same locksmith who had installed the lock on her lab door.

The locksmith was a little puzzled at why anyone would want a lock which required a key to open it from both sides, but he said he could build her one. Amelia made sure he understood it was to be a spring lock which automatically locked when the door closed.

She had a bad moment when she explained the loss of her keys and he said that was no problem. Since he had installed the original lock, he had a master key which would open it and could easily make her another key, so that she could use it until the new lock was installed.

She said that wouldn't be necessary, since she didn't have to get into the lab any more that day. As it was an emergency, the locksmith agreed to build the new lock that night and install it in the morning.

Thursday evening, as Amelia, her husband and Virginia all sat in the front room, Amelia set the stage. Reaching for her bag, which lay on an end table next to her chair, she took out a shiny new brass key and held it up.

"I had a new lock installed on my lab door today, dear. This time there's only one key."

Her husband raised his eyebrows. "You had the present lock installed only a couple of months ago."

"I lost my key ring. I'm starting a new project in a few days, and I have to be sure no one but me can possibly get into the lab."

Maytum frowned at his daughter.

"Oh, I didn't lose it in the house," Amelia said quickly. "It was missing when I got back from the beauty shop yesterday. I phoned there, but they couldn't find it. I didn't have the new lock put in because I thought someone might find the keys and use them. I had it installed because I couldn't open the old one myself."

Her husband's frown disappeared.

"My house key was on the ring too," Amelia said. "I'll have to have another made. Will you leave yours in the morning?"

"I'll give it to you right now," Maytum said, taking a keyring from his pocket, removing a key and tossing it to her.

"Perhaps Virginia would have it made for me tomorrow at the dime store over at the Plaza," Amelia said with a smile at the child. "It's only a block and a half."

"Of course she will," Maytum said. "Won't you, dear? Then Amelia's work won't be disturbed."

"Okay," Virginia said indifferently. "I guess I can."

In the morning, after Maytum had left for work, Amelia called Virginia into the front room, opened her bag, took out the door key and a dollar bill. She lay the bag on top of the bookcase.

"Here is the key and the money to pay for it," she said, handing both to Virginia. "I don't know whether it will cost twenty-five or fifty cents, but you have more than enough there."

"All right," Virginia said without much interest.

"I have to go next door to Mrs. Johnson's for a while, and I'll probably still be there when you get back. Just leave the key and the change on the bookcase. Mrs. Murphy will probably come before either of us get back, so we'll leave the front door unlocked."

She went over, pulled the front door open and adjusted the lock so that she could get back in. "If you need me for anything after you get back, I'll be next door for at least an hour."

"All right," the girl said, making no move to follow her out.

Amelia went out, closed the door behind her and walked over next door.

From Mrs. Johnson's kitchen window Amelia could see her front porch. As the woman poured coffee into two cups, Amelia saw Virginia run down the steps and hurry up the street.

"You know, I think I left the front door locked, and my housekeeper is due," Amelia said. "I'll be right back."

She ran back home and looked into her handbag, still lying on the bookcase. The new key to the lab was gone.

She returned to Mrs. Johnson's.

She kept watch through the kitchen window as she chatted over coffee with the neighbor woman. At nine she saw Mrs. Murphy arrive and go into the house. Fifteen minutes later Virginia returned.

Amelia immediately made her excuses and rose to leave. She wanted Virginia to have time to return the stolen key to the purse, but she certainly didn't want her to have time to visit the lab now.

She timed it just right. The sound of Mrs. Murphy vacuuming came from upstairs. Virginia was heading for the hallway leading to the lab. The girl turned when she heard the door open.

Amelia picked up the two house keys and the fifty-cent piece lying next to her bag.

"It was fifty cents?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes, ma'am," the child said.

Amelia picked up her bag.

"Well, I have to get to work," she said. "Don't get in Mrs. Murphy's way."

"No, ma'am," Virginia said.

When Amelia reached the laboratory door and felt in her bag for the key, it was there.

Only one thing could go wrong now, she reflected. It was possible

Virginia would take the key in with her when she entered the lab. But since on her previous visit she had left it in the lock and had closed the door behind her, it was unlikely.

Robert didn't work Saturdays, but he was off playing golf when it was time for Amelia to drive to the airport. From previous experience Amelia knew Mrs. Murphy couldn't be trusted to keep Virginia away from the lab. She solved the problem by taking the child with her.

The package was about three feet long by two square and had a diamond-shaped design of pinholes in each end. Back home Amelia locked herself in the laboratory and removed the outer wrapping. It was a lidded, sheet-metal box, each end of which contained the same diamond-shaped pinhole design as the wrapping.

Amelia and her husband had taken Virginia to one session of the church school. She hadn't liked it and refused to attend again. Probably, Amelia suspected, the Sunday-school teacher had refused to let her monopolize the attention of the class. Thereafter Virginia stayed home when her father and Amelia attended church.

Although Sunday was Mrs. Murphy's day off, Amelia wasn't burdened with cooking. Saturday evening the housekeeper always placed a roast in a pot along with peeled potatoes, carrots and onions and set it in the refrigerator. Sunday morning all Amelia had to do was add a little water, put the pot in the oven, and dinner was ready when they arrived home from church.

But since Mrs. Murphy was off, Virginia was left in the house alone Sunday mornings.

On the way to church Amelia reviewed her planning. She didn't see how her husband could possibly blame her after all the precautions she had taken to keep Virginia out of the lab. It would patently be a case of the child's meddling in direct violation of orders.

As they drove back from church, Amelia said casually, "I forgot to mention it, but the specimens for my new project arrived yesterday."

"Oh?" Maytum said. "What is the project?"

"I'm going to try to crossbreed the *Apis mellifera adamsonii* with some gentler strain in order to make the breed more tractible without reducing its output."

'The *Apis* what?" he said.

"It's a bee. Specifically the African or Mau Mau bee. About ten years ago twenty African queens were imported to Brazil and crossbred with Italian and German bees. Africans are quite vicious, but produce about thirty percent more honey than Italians or Germans. It was hoped the crossbreeding would produce a gentler breed without lessening output.

"Unfortunately it produced a strain with a high output, but even more vicious than the original Afri-

cans. From those original twenty queens, millions of the new strain have developed. They've built hives everywhere: under bridges, in drainage pipes, in chimneys. It's become such a problem, the Brazilian government has appointed a special committee to solve it."

"They're dangerous?" Maytum asked.

"They attack without provocation, in swarms. They aren't like most bees, who only sting in defense. They seem to attack anything that moves. They've killed an enormous amount of livestock in Brazil: chickens, goats, even horses. And at least four people so far."

"Good grief! How many of the things do you have in the lab?"

"An associate in Rio de Janeiro sent me a comb with a colony of about five hundred in it. They're quite safely locked up, though. And there's only one key to the new lock."

She opened her bag and held up the key.

"Here it is," she said with a smile. "Nobody but me could possibly get in."

When they arrived home, the house seemed unnaturally quiet to Amelia. She had to control her urge to go immediately to her lab. Firmly she told herself it would be much more natural to wait until her husband began to worry about Virginia's whereabouts, then for them to discover the tragedy together when they finally searched the house.

She went upstairs to remove her hat. Maytum went with her, hung his suit coat in the closet and stripped off his tie. Then he crossed the hall to glance into Virginia's room.

"She must be downstairs," he commented.

Amelia was so sure of where Virginia was, she didn't bother to carry her bag with her when they went downstairs again, because she no longer had to be careful to keep the lab key with her at all times.

In the lower hall Maytum called, "Virginia!"

When there was no answer, he said, "She must have wandered up the street. How soon's dinner?"

"It should be ready to come out of the oven now."

"I'll take a look around the neighborhood," Maytum said.

He went out the front door.

Things were working out perfectly, Amelia thought. The suspense had her heart hammering so loudly, she was afraid her husband would notice. Now she had an opportunity to make sure the plot had worked. Once she knew, she felt she could control herself and let things naturally lead up to their simultaneous discovery of the tragedy.

She would merely peek into the lab, then close the door again.

She hurried down the hallway to the rear of the house. Her excitement mounted to fever pitch when she saw the key in the lock of the lab door.

She had no fear of entering the lab. Bees stung only once, leaving their stingers in their enemies. And since *Apis mellifera adamsonii* attacked simultaneously in a swarm it was extremely unlikely there was a live bee left in the lab.

Twisting the key, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. The lid of the sheet-metal box was wide open, but there was no sign of Virginia.

Amelia felt overwhelming disappointment. She had been so sure Virginia couldn't resist poking at the honeycomb, and she had also been sure the child would close the door behind her. But apparently she had done neither. She must have been frightened by the sight of the bees crawling over the comb, and had rushed from the room and pulled the door closed behind her only a moment after raising the lid.

At least she had been shaken enough to forget to take the key from the lock, Amelia thought. If nothing else, Amelia could point to it as final conclusive evidence of the child's meddlesomeness, and perhaps convince her father she was not as perfect as he thought.

From force of habit Amelia pushed the laboratory door closed before crossing the room to close the lid of the sheet-metal box. It wasn't until she reached it that she realized the colony was no longer in the box.

A sudden low-toned buzzing caused her to glance toward her work table. Its top, its sides and its legs were solidly covered by crawling bees.

For a moment she stood rigid. Then, as the buzzing grew to an angry roar and the swarm took to the air in a dense cloud, she rushed for the door.

She began to scream even before she felt the shock of the first stings. It was a scream of frustration rather than agony, because Virginia's illicit key was still in the outer lock and her own was upstairs in her bag.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE AFFAIR OF THE GANDER'S SAUCE

A New Complete Short Novel

by FLETCHER FLORA

Dames on his mind, murder in his soul—three fresh graves testified to his prowess. Who was he? Nobody in our town dared to guess—except my nosey wife!

WARPED CLUE

by

CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

The woods had a strange way of changing their shape . . . to trap a killer.

DIANA SAT ON the narrow cot with her pretty head in her hands and sobbed. Dave Welch watched her, his back against the bars of the cell door.

"Di," he said, "I'm going up to Tod's cabin this afternoon to look around. Can you think of anything I should watch for?"

She sat still for a moment, trembling. Dave knelt beside her, and took her by the shoulders. She looked up, her eyes dark and shiny with tears.

"I've told you all I know," she said. "It was a hot night and I felt like going for a drive. My car stalled on the hill. The temperature gauge was way up, and the car wouldn't start again. I went for help, but the gas station at the foot of the hill was closed for the night. When I got back to the car, it was pouring, and the police were there. They took me to the cabin, and I identified Tod's body. That's all I know."

"You had no idea Tod was going with your sister?" Dave asked her.

Diana looked down. "I didn't even know Jean knew him. At least they can't accuse her. She was at a square dance miles away."

Dave nodded and signaled the jailer. There was a rattle of keys, and Dave stepped out into the corridor. Diana looked up at him.

"If I had known," she said, "maybe I would have killed Tod. But I didn't."

A half hour later, Dave Welch swung his car up the hill road, rounded a curve, and went up a steep grade till he saw a spot where several cars had parked, crushing down the sparse weeds by the edge of the road. He pulled over, yanked on the brake, and glanced at the heat indicator. The engine was hot. Di's story, so far, was perfectly reasonable. He put the car keys in his pocket and got out.

By the roadside, the white pines grew thick and close. The forest floor was a mat of fallen needles. The air was hot and faintly moist. Dave ducked the stiffly-branching lower limbs of the pines, which were just high enough so he could pass between them for several hundred feet. He stepped out into a brightly sunlit clearing.

A big cabin with a stone chimney, unscreened porch, and a shingled roof charred black on one side, was perched on the summit of the slope. A gravel driveway ran downhill from the left, and curved around in front of the dwelling. To reach the cabin by car, it was necessary to drive far up the hill, turn right onto a winding road, then come down this gravel driveway.

Dave was sure that Di could never have gone so far on foot, and reached her car by the time the police found her there. But the distance through the woods was only a few hundred feet, and from the woods to the cabin the open stretch she would have had to cross was no wider. The police argued that Diana had gone through the woods, killed Tod Holmes, and returned through the woods to a place below her car, where they had seen her on the road. Except for the accident of a

neighbor hearing a still-unexplained shot and phoning the police, Diana would, the police argued, have gotten away unnoticed.

Dave Welch shook his head. The best way to disprove this was to show that Diana had not gone through the woods at all. But there were no witnesses, and Dave had just seen that the woods were not impassible.

He looked down at the cabin. Sunlight glittered on its roof and a black police car was parked on the roadway directly in front of it. Dave walked across the field above the cabin, then down the drive with the sun hot on his back and the gravel crunching underfoot.

At the front of the cabin was a narrow stone terrace. A tall hard-eyed policeman walked across the terrace to stand watching as Dave approached.

The policeman gave a short laugh. "I know you," he said. "You're going with the girl. Your picture was in her handbag." He mopped his forehead, and pulled a rumpled cigaret pack from his pocket. "You can't go in." He rapped the pack, then frowned. It was empty.

Dave took out a package of Camels and extended it toward him. "I don't want to go in. I just came up to check the distances."

The policeman helped himself to a cigaret and nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Why did you go across the field above the cabin for?"

"So I could walk in on the gravel, and you'd hear me coming."

"I thought you were snooping." He looked at Dave curiously a moment, then said, "Have a seat. I have to watch this place till the D. A. is sure he's got everything he wants. I can't let you go inside, but maybe I can show you what you're up against. You figure the girl didn't do it?"

"I'm sure she didn't."

Ths policeman shook his head. "It's open and shut. The body was right up on the porch there. Head smashed in with a medium-size rock from the wall by the porch steps. Nothing was stolen. There was eighty dollars in his wallet when we found him. What was the motive? Somebody just plain didn't like him."

"Ted Holmes had a lot of enemies."

"Sure. He was a ladies' man. There must have been a dozen husbands and boy friends who'd have been happy to swing that

rock. But look at this place. There's only one road out of here. The neighbors didn't see any car go by. On the other hand, there was your girl, parked maybe two hundred yards away. Now, by good luck our first car happened to be coming down the hill when the station got the call about the shot. The car was near the side road, so they turned in, and saw the cabin roof on fire. They got here in time to find the body on the porch, and put in a call for a fire truck and some help. I came up in the second car. We came uphill just as the storm broke, and saw your girl walking through the pouring rain to her car."

Dave Welch said, "She'd just gone down to the garage. But it was closed, so she came back up here."

The policeman smiled. "I halfway believed it that night. Sure, the woods looked too close to walk through. And we knew she couldn't have gone by the road in time. But the next day we checked, and we could walk through those woods almost as if they weren't there. That meant she could have done it. Then we found out how fond she is of her kid sister. We found out the murdered man had so many girl friends, and ditched them so fast, that his friends compared them to paper plates—'Tod's disposable women.' He was almost old enough to be the father of your girl's sister. And yet, he'd been seen taking her out lately. We figure your Diana didn't want her sister to start life as one of 'Tod's disposable women.' She came up here to tell him so. He laughed at her. Then things got rough."

"She didn't know he was going with her sister."

"That's what she'd say," the policeman said.

Dave sat back in the gathering heat of the day. Finally he said, "What about that shot?"

"His own gun. We found it in the shrubs by the porch. Either he grabbed it to protect himself, or she picked it up, and in the struggle one of them knocked it out of the other's hand."

Dave thought of Diana, her eyes large and dark, pleading with him to believe her. He did believe, but who else would?

Time stretched out, and he knew he had to find something that no one else had thought of. But what?

The policeman mopped his perspiring forehead, and moved his chair back into the dwindling shadow of the cabin. "Better get her to plead guilty. The thing is open and shut."

Dave Welch shook his head and got up. He glanced around at the cabin with its partly-burned, warped shingle roof. He blinked. The shingles, now in the full glare of the sun, appeared more warped than earlier. He glanced around at

the pine woods, the dead lower branches seeming to make a barrier around the clearing. He shrugged impatiently, and looked at the policeman.

"Isn't there anyone you'd think might have done it—if you weren't so sure about Diana?"

The policeman looked at him thoughtfully. "She was here. She had the motive. Just don't try to warp the facts, and you'll see how it had to be."

Dave stared at him. He looked at the warped shingles on the roof, then out at the thick pine woods. He whirled suddenly, and started up the drive with the sun blazing down in his face. Behind him, the policeman shouted, but Dave scarcely heard him.

He crossed the field to the woods, walked in, and a stiff dry branch poked him in the face. He ducked and another branch caught his sleeve. He pulled loose, and a branch jabbed him in the side. He backed up, tried again, and managed to work his way further in, slowly and carefully.

Behind him he heard the snap of a dead limb, and glanced back over his shoulder.

The policeman was right behind him, frowning.

Dave felt his heart beat fast. "This isn't an open-and-shut case," he said. "It's an open-and-shut woods."

"I don't get it. I've walked through and it was no trouble. You came through here yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it wasn't as easy as for you—after the storm."

"The storm. Wait a minute. It started to rain after the murder. Before, the weather was dry as dust. When the white pines were wet, it was easy to walk through. Now the sun's dried things out, it's hard. Why?"

Dave Welch glanced down at the cabin. "What warps shingles? The underneath part stays damp shrinks in the sun. With these white pines, the rain strikes the dead lower branches, and drains down along the bottom edge. It's the same as if you take the straw out of a soda and hold it level. The liquid runs along the lower edge."

The policeman nodded slowly. "The bottom of the dead pine branch gets wetter than the top, expands, and the whole business warps up out of the way." He shook his head. "It was dry before that storm. That means the woods were like they are now, or worse. The girl couldn't have got through in time to do it."

"I told you she was innocent."

"It's a good thing you believed her. Come on."

"What are you going to do?"

"Put in a call. The fellow who called up about that shot is renting the summer place by the end of this drive. After he called up, he took his usual sleeping pills and turned in. When he gave his state-

ment the next day, he said he'd heard the shot while walking his dog in the woods back of his place. Those woods are a continuation of these. They're the only woods like this around here, and apparently were planted when this was one big farm. My guess is, he'd never been out in them before and made that story up the next morning."

"You think he did it?"

"Well, it's guesswork, but we know his story isn't true, and we know Tod's reputation. Suppose he went down there and had a fight with Tod Holmes. Afterward, he could have set fire to the tinder-dry shingles, called the police to create a look of innocence, and gone to bed sure no one could get here before the cabin burned down."

"Sounds reasonable."

They were walking down the drive, the gravel crunching underfoot, and the sun blazing down from above. As they approached the patrol car, the policeman took out his handkerchief. "A hot day," he said.

Dave Welch nodded. "It'll be another warm night."

For the first time since Diana had been arrested, Dave smiled.

Tonight he thought they might go for a drive.

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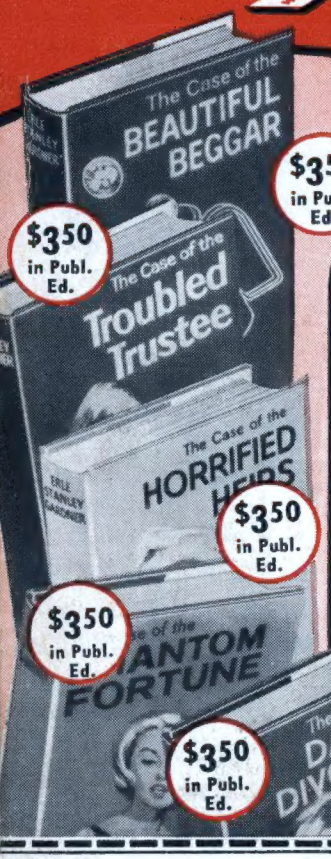
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